新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑮

「ぼくの『理想送り』ときみの『幻想殺し』。ぶつかったらどっちが勝つのかな？」

神をも凌駕する右手を持つ少年二人の激突から一夜明け。

上条当麻と上里翔流は、譲れない想いを胸に、学校の食堂で献立片手に睨み合う!?

世界を賭けた戦いよりも留年の脅威を感じ、それどころではない上条。一方の上里も、なぜかフレンドリーに接してくる。これは意外にも熱き友情路線にルート変更か？　と感じた刹那。街に半裸レインコートの少女が現れた。

その半裸少女の正体は、謎の第三勢力……ではなく、あの上里さえも畏怖する妹・去鳴で――!?

か-12-68

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑮

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫

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鎌池和馬

去鳴のイメージはクリオネなのですが、改めて水族館など回ってみるとこのクリオネが意外と見つからない！五秒一〇秒の資料映像のありがたさを再認識しつつ、今日のところはクラゲで間を埋めてみます。

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録①～⑮
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計11冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童 全⑨巻
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
未踏召喚：// ブラッドサイン①～④
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情
最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点 その名は［ぶー ぶー］

イラスト：はいむらきよたか

広島の片田舎で、もそもそ絵を描いております。

「んーう……ふわぁああああ」

去鳴（サロメ）

『絶滅犯』と呼ばれている、『上里勢力』の一人。上里の義理の妹でもある

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録インデックス 15

鎌池和馬

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

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「すみません、
色々似合ってなくてすみません！
でもほら基本的に選挙で
決まる事ですから……ッ!!」

上条達が転入してきた学校の生徒会長。
こう見えても高等部所属。ニックネームは『ビクビクウサギ』
化生院明日香（けしょういん・あすか）

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)

「あ、あの、仲良くやって、いますか？」
「何じゃあ小娘」
「きみさ、何で無頼漢モードになってるの？」
上条当麻の『幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）』と対をなす『理想送り（ワールドリジェクター）』を右手に宿す『平凡な少年』
上里翔流（かみさと・かける）

「やめろっ、お前達敬礼で見送るのはやめろっ!!」
右手に異能ならなんでも打ち消す力を宿す少年
上条当麻（かみじょう・とうま）
「今さらコソコソ身を隠して何になる？」
元グレムリンの『魔神』。上条によって救われたものの、『魔神』としての能力を失った
オティヌス
「貴様その肩に乗っている恥ずかしい女の子の人形はどういうつもりなの？」
上条のクラスメイトにして『対カミジョー属性完全ガード』の女
吹寄制理（ふきよせ・せいり）

「アンタ、は……？」

学園都市に七人しかいない『超能力者（レベル5）』の一人で、『超電磁砲（レールガン）』の異名を持つ少女

御坂美琴（みさかみこと）

「そうだね、上里翔流の妹とでも呼んでちょうだい。ああ、義理の方でね」

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録 インデックス 15

鎌池和馬

イラスト・はいむらきよたか

デザイン・渡邊宏一（2725 Inc.）

PROLOGUE

The Reverse Reverse Side of the Coin.

Rock_on_Right_Arm.

The meaning of each individual event may not be immediately evident.

But when viewed together, something else entirely comes into view.

♦

——December 3. The High Priest, one of the Magic Gods visiting Academy City, brought extreme disaster.

What they wanted was incredibly simple.

“We want a way of knowing if we are doing the right thing.”

In exchange for taking on that one role, he would be lent the power of all the Magic Gods and be tossed into a framework that made him ruler of the world.

“Become our scorer and obtain the altar of the Magic Gods, Kamijou Touma.”

♦

——After Kamijou Touma rejected the High Priest’s wish and fled on a new kind of bicycle known as an acrobike, Misaka Mikoto joined him and was faced with a concept that overturned the very core of her being.

“It isn’t working...”

She was one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s. She was the #3 Railgun.

But after utilizing all of that, a certain thought came to her mind.

“I’m only a burden to him!!”

♦

——The High Priest was launched outside the atmosphere using a giant mass driver, but he fused with the Arrowhead Comet and attempted to return to earth. Then, that Magic God was intercepted and killed in an unexpected way.

“Sensei, are you ready?”

It was the Anti-Art Attachment.

The golden retriever attached to that large mountain of weaponry spoke with an artificial voice.

“Yes, you need to stand back a little.”

♦

——Aleister and Kihara Noukan observed Academy City from a different viewpoint and thus they noticed something.

“One down. No, with Zombie, I suppose it’s two.”

“Well done. That takes care of the Magic Gods.”

“What are you talking about? I only took out the High Priest.”

“Then you didn’t do that?”

♦

——Another shadow had entered Academy City.

Kamisato Kakeru. The supernatural power in his right hand was World Rejecter.

“Ah ha ha! Nephthys, this is amazing! This...this is what I’ve been waiting for! It’ll finally finally be over!!”

It easily slaughtered the true Magic God named Niang-Niang and tore into brown Nephthys.

“Gh...bh. What...are...?”

“I am the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere.”

♦

——When Kamijou returned to his student dorm disheartened but alive, the next disaster arrived in the form of a package.

“Wha-!? N-Nephthys!?”

“Kamisato Kakeru has shown up. If he is planning to slaughter all of the Magic Gods, then wouldn’t Othinus be in trouble too?”

♦

——That same day, two boys ran across each other on the streets at night.

“That’s your business. It has nothing to do with me.”

“True. And that is exactly why I don’t need to worry about you in the slightest.”

♦

——Just before their clash, the colors red and black attacked them simultaneously.

“What is this? ...Birdway?”

Kamijou Touma grabbed the one sister from a rotten red carpet.

“Pa...Patri...Patricia Birdway? Is that it?”

Kamisato Kakeru lifted the other sister from a black substance.

♦

——Just as people gathered around Kamijou Touma, plenty of people gathered around Kamisato Kakeru.

“The setup is complete.”

“Did she really think a hot-blooded boy was going to back off when he heard that?”

“She only draws Kamisato-san in because she isn’t aware what she’s doing.”

♦

——One sister was throwing away her life to save the other, while the other was giving up on her life to stop the first.

The two boys with supernatural powers in their right hands became involved in that confrontation.

“Didn’t you find it odd that they’re being so unnaturally nice to us? We’re supposed to be normal high school boys.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

♦

——It all came to an end.

The two simply could not agree, so they confronted each other again late at night.

“Before that, I was simply curious,” said Kamisato Kakeru. “If my World Rejecter and your Imagine Breaker clash, which one will win?”

♦

——Kamijou Touma with Imagine Breaker and Kamisato Kakeru with World Rejecter.

Once the two right fists clashed, a conclusion was certain. One of them would be declared the winner.

“Imagine Breaker didn’t amount to much.”

In this case, it ended with Kamisato’s victory.

Or it should have.

“Who would have thought there was something else *inside* Imagine Breaker?”

♦

And...

And...

And...

♦

“Pant, pant...!!”

In the middle of the Academy City night, a boy covered in sweat sat with his back against a building’s concrete building.

It was Kamijou Touma.

He gasped for breath and held his dangling right arm with his left hand.

Blood was splattered all over the road.

It had only been his own blood at first and it should have remained that way.

He had clashed with Kamisato.

His arm had been torn away by World Rejecter and sent “somewhere else”.

The explosion of intense pain and the almost comical geyser of red blood were still burnt into the back of his mind.

But...

Even so...

“What...was that?”

Unable to even stand up, he gulped.

Even now, his right arm was attached like normal. He had no noticeable injuries. He remained so perfectly healthy that one would assume the red stains covering his clothes came from someone else.

Also, Kamisato Kakeru, the boy he had confronted here, was gone.

“*What in the world was that*?”

His heart pounded in his ears.

He could not think properly.

Two types of blood were splattered everywhere. One was from the severed arm and the other was from Kamisato Kakeru who should have had an absolute advantage.

Kamijou could not believe what he had seen with his own eyes.

The confusion inside him would not settle down as he continued staring fearfully toward his right arm that pulsated from within like a pump.

He had run across unexplainable phenomena a few times in the past.

There was something about his right arm.

He knew that.

But...

(It doesn't add up.)

At the end of the chaos in the Eastern European Baggage City, his right arm had done something mysterious. A strange power had erupted from the severed wrist.

But incomplete Magic God Othinus had easily crushed it in her grasp.

If Othinus could defeat it on her own, then it made no sense for it to overwhelm Kamisato Kakeru who could instantly slaughter the full power Magic Gods. That was like saying you could not defeat a single gun but that you could defeat an army armed with thousands or tens of thousands of guns. Of course, there may have been an issue of compatibility where a simple pyramid structure did not apply, but it still felt wrong.

Regardless, the fact remained that Kamijou Touma had driven off Kamisato Kakeru.

He should not have been able to, but he had done it.

"..."

That bloody back appeared in the back of Kamijou's mind.

Something higher on the food chain. An unbeatable predator. A supernatural power with those parameters set in stone.

Kamijou remembered the look in Kamisato's eyes as the boy glanced back over his shoulder just before leaving.

The boy had been holding his unnaturally limp right arm and leaving on unsteady feet without a stable center of gravity.

Confusion.

Hatred.

Fear.

Before, his eyes had contained a lukewarm look directed at the boy he thought was the same as him, but that had been decisively excised. And Kamijou could understand why. He could now anyway.

After all...

"What is...this?"

He returned to the very first question.

He had asked this of himself over and over again, but he could not find the answer.

In other words...

“Is this really the same as...*that one from before*?”

CHAPTER 1

Confrontation, or New Days.

Turn_a_New-Leaf.

Part 1

The next day was December 4.

"..."

To be honest, Kamijou Touma was feeling blue. He did not know what had happened to Kamisato Kakeru and his faction. Nor did he know what the Magic Gods like Othinus were doing. On top of that, he could no longer trust in his right hand. He felt like heading off to school like a clockwork doll. He felt like throwing a blanket over his head and spending the whole day trembling on his own. Even the arrival of dawn seemed unreasonable to him.

However...

"Don't forget."

He faced himself in the bathroom mirror with a 120% serious look on his face.

This was not some cool self-suggestion meant to remind him how important every single day was.

"Why was it Komoe-sensei forced that ridiculous toy of an acrobike on you during the anti-crime orientation? She said something ominous!! She gave you a death sentence about not being able to cover for my absences and moving onto the next year being nearly hopeless!!"

If a cruel teacher that focused on grades above all else had said that while looking down on him, he might have fought back a little, but this had not felt like a threat. It had felt far too much like she had tried everything and was out of ideas. It had never really been resolved after the surge of panic caused by the High Priest, so he had no idea if he was in the clear or not.

So what would happen if he skipped school for no real reason now? The truly undesirable trophy of “held back” could be added to his already acrobatic school life. For real!!

“No!! I don’t want to be the one guy in the class everyone calls an upperclassman!! I don’t think I could stand being an upperclassman character even though I’d be a first year!!”

Fifteen centimeter Fairy Othinus spoke up in exasperation after slipping in through the slight gap below the bathroom door.

“Why are you shouting into the mirror? Is it time for your tranquilizer?”

“Oh, help me god!!”

“I don’t know what this is about, but I don’t give any divine help to science worshipers. If you have time to play at self Gestaltzerfall, then go make breakfast. I don’t really care, but that white nun and the feline beast are going nuts. ...That calico bastard especially scares me since I think it sees me as an emergency food source. This is the problem with quadrupeds...”

With that, it was cooking time.

The hotpot commotion the night before had ended in about the worst possible way. All they had were the chopped vegetables, bread, eggs, and spices that Kamijou had gotten at a convenience store. His mind had been so full of confusion after the Kamisato battle that he had really only stopped by the store out of pure habit bordering on a homing instinct. He had screamed when he saw the receipt later, but at least it gave him something to make a breakfast with.

Plus, he did not want to go to any extra effort when faced with so many crises: the mystery of Kamisato, the mystery of his right hand, the mystery of whether he would be held back, the mystery of Index’s stomach, and the mystery of the window that was still broken in the middle of winter.

Thus, he chose to make French toast for breakfast, a dish that looked like it took a lot of effort but was actually quite easy.

Index, in her teacup-like habit of white fabric with gold embroidery, used the plastic fork and knife that came with convenience store pasta and pancakes to squeakily cut through the bread with her eyes glittering a little too brightly.

“Chowing down on something sweet first thing in the morning makes me feel a bit like a bad girl.”

“You like everything, so I can’t exactly go on what you think.”

Othinus accidentally plunged head-first into the small dish of honey and the calico cat enjoyed the usual cat food.

No matter how many problems he had on his plate, the hands of the clock moved just as fast.

After cleaning the dishes, Kamijou grabbed his school bag and started for the front door.

“I’ll be going.”

“Okay. Hurry on back.”

As he left the dorm and walked along the usual path to school, a girl’s voice reached him from his school bag.

“Human, don’t shake me so much.”

It was Magic God Othinus.

“That’s better.”

“Othinus!? Please don’t tell me you’ve taken a liking to this! Everyone at school’s going to think I’m bringing weird things with me!!”

“Shut up. I don’t want to keep using such a cheap method either.”

The fifteen centimeter exhibitionist climbed out of the bag, up his arm, and onto his shoulder (which was quickly becoming her usual spot).

It now felt like she was whispering into his ear.

“I feel like you haven’t been speaking as much since you fought Kamisato. Are you willing to tell me what happened?”

“…”

His focus shifted to his right arm that Othinus had grabbed just a moment before.

“Nothing really happened.”

“What, did you kill and bury Kamisato somewhere? I am a god of magic, strategy, and deception. Did you really think I would be bothered by that?”

“That’s being far too accepting!! And it’s setting the bar way too low, Miss Understander!! Of course I didn’t do that!!”

He ended up shouting back at her, but then he had another thought.

He did not actually understand at all what had happened to him at that moment, at that instant.

He could not even use the usual assumption about negating all supernatural powers. What affect did his right hand have, how far was its effective range, and what activated it? That was the vague power that had been sent after Kamisato Kakeru.

In that case, he could not entirely rule it out.

He could not rule out the hypothetical future of trembling in front of Kamisato's corpse and biting his nails as he desperately tried to figure out what to do.

"Hey."

He forced out his voice as if peeling apart his oddly dried throat to allow air through.

"Do you remember Baggage City? Back then, you...touched it... You touched the invisible thing that flew from my arm when you ripped my hand off.

"Are you trying to take revenge by bringing up things I would rather forget?"

"Ow!! Don't bite my earlobe that hard, Othinus!!"

The small god sighed through her nose.

"I can make a good guess, but that is not from my domain. Although if Bersi were still alive, it would be pretty easy to confirm that guess."

"Bersi?"

He had not expected to hear that name.

"You mean Kihara Kagun? But wait a second. Imagine Breaker is the collection of the all the hopes of magicians...that is the magic side and their god-ranked Magic Gods. So what would he have to do with this?"

"First of all, Bersi was not simply an expert on the science side. He was skilled on both sides. Make no mistake about that."

Othinus lightly tugged on his ear.

"Second of all, this is a giant institution for raising espers, remember? I don't know what the other Magic Gods were telling you, but did you think this place had nothing at all to do with it?"

"..."

It pained him that he had lost his memories.

But according to his father, Touya, Imagine Breaker (or the misfortune it brought as a side effect) had been with him since before he came to Academy City. So that his son would not be treated as a god of pestilence due to his strange trait, Touya had sent him to Academy City where it would be understood scientifically and numerically.

(No.)

After some thought, Kamijou found an unpleasant alternate interpretation.

(All my dad and the others saw was the misfortune. They didn't know about Imagine Breaker, the power of my right hand to negate supernatural powers. So I can't actually prove that Imagine Breaker was complete at that point. But Index said the misfortune is created by my right hand negating the blessings of god. That would mean Imagine Breaker has to precede the misfortune. What does this mean? How can I twist this around...?)

Negation after negation stacked on top of each other.

He was not even sure which side he stood on.

And...

(Othinus seems to know something, but her information stops at Baggage City.)

He gulped and continued thinking in silence.

(Her information hasn't been updated, so she might not be able to explain what it was that drove Kamisato away.)

"Hey."

"!? What is it, Othinus?"

"Just look up ahead. This doesn't look good."

"...?"

Kamijou had lowered his head in thought, so he looked forward once more. He was almost at school and was in fact right in front of the main gate. It may indeed have been something like a homing instinct because he had not strayed from the path even while lost in thought.

But...

It was flattened.

What was? Kamijou's high school.

“What the hell?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me!! How can we have classes now!? And what happens to me if we can’t? My attendance is already in the danger zone and I have one leg sticking out into the abyss of being held back!!”

“Oh, is that why you’ve been looking so grim this morning?”

Like an interrupted line of ants, boys and girls with nowhere to go were gathered around the schoolyard.

Among them, Kamijou’s panic-stricken mind gradually provided him with information.

It had happened yesterday. Yes, just the day before.

What had the Magic God known as the High Priest done after entering the school? Hadn’t he created a giant arm of dirt and mud and crushed the school as some kind of demonstration?

“I already told you, didn’t I? It is a matter of sooner or later, of before or after you lose something.”

In other words, it had been about a possibility, an ever-so-slight possibility.

There was no school building, so there would be no classes. If this was not counted as an excused absence, he would not receive credit for the class.

And he would be held back?

“High....”

A tiny thread in Kamijou-san’s mind snapped.

“High Priiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeee

“I’m not sure I understand, but are you sure this isn’t a god’s curse?”

“He shows up uninvited, vanishes out of the blue, and leaves nothing but a curse behind!? How much trouble can one old man be!?”

“That bastard probably isn’t so bad compared to Greek mythology where a perverted old man attacked a human girl, his cruel wife snapped, and for some reason it was the human girl who was treated as a thief and received divine punishment.”

“Gods are just awful, aren’t they!?”

“That includes me, you know?”

“Can you look me in the eye and swear you’ve never done anything like that, Othinus? I don’t know much about Norse mythology, but I’m betting there’s something there.”

“Ahem.”

He could guess what it meant when the eyepatch maiden cleared her throat.

“Let’s see what turns up when I search ‘Odin’ and ‘cruelty’.”

“Stop! You have to be insane to search someone’s name in front of them!”

At any rate...

“What are we going to do about class today? Are we going to have an open-air classroom in front of this rubble? Or are they going to cancel school for the day? If they do that, it’ll be an excused absence and it won’t count against me, right!? This was an unforeseen accident, so I’ll be okay, won’t I!? A-ahhh!! I’m really on the precipice when it comes to being held back!!”

“You challenged a god like me over a period of time reaching into the billions, so why does repeating a year or two bother you so much?”

Half the school was smashed flat and the other half was untouched, but due to earthquake resistance and some other reasons, no one was allowed inside. The students who had arrived at the usual time had nowhere to go, so they had all gathered in one corner of the schoolyard looking at and snapping photos of the crushed school building.

“This is crazy, isn’t it?”

Fukiyose Seiri, a classmate notable for her black hair and forehead (and captivatingly large breasts) spoke to him with a breath from her nose.

“It looks like the scenes of air strikes I’ve seen on TV. I don’t know if this was due to liquefaction or subsidence, but it’s a miracle no one died when it collapsed so spectacularly.”

“Fukiyose-san. This is only something of an exit poll to help with my peace of mind, but do you think we’re actually going to have classes today?”

After Kamijou’s hesitant question, Fukiyose’s eyes widened as if she had seen something disturbing and she quickly backed away from him. She wrapped her trembling arms around her own body as if to hide her (very, very large) breasts.

“K-Kamijou... You actually care about school and classes?”

“Um, Fukiyose-san?”

“Does this mean there are still more disasters to come!? We already had the school collapse and a comet fall, so what else could there be!?”

“I want to cry, but I can’t when this is my own damn fault!!”

“Anyway, I don’t see how we could possibly have classes. We might be able to manage the normal subjects taught with textbooks by holding class out in the schoolyard, but we need special equipment for esper development. I seriously doubt we’ll be going on a treasure hunt through that pile of rubble, and it’s unrealistic to expect them to have prepared a full set of new equipment overnight.”

“Th-then can you make any guesses what will happen to Kamijou-san’s attendance?”

“I believe you said it best yourself: it’s your own damn fault, First Year Kamijou.”

“Stop looking down on me and calling me a first year!! That gentle smile only makes it worse!!”

He was almost completely in tears as he clung to his large-breasted classmate, but then a timid voice reached him from below.

“I-it’ll be okay.”

The two classmates saw nothing at eye level, so they looked down a little and found the 135 cm teacher named Tsukuyomi Komoe proudly puffing out her (nonexistent) chest.

“A failure in the equipment or facilities is a failure of the faculty, so this accident will not mean taking any extra classes during winter break. We have a plan ready to go.”

“Phew.”

“O-of course, Kamijou-chan is in an extremely tight spot where using up all of winter and spring break might or might not be enough, but I won’t give up on you until the very, very last moment.”

“Wait. So yesterday’s anti-crime orientation didn’t earn me any points at all!? High Priiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeest!!”

That old man had done a wonderful job of taking the position of the “idealized heroine who only appears in flashbacks” and Kamijou could swear he saw a handsome version of him smiling down from the blue sky. In a way, this gradual poison damage was far crueler than anything Fiamma or Othinus had ever done to him.

Next to him, Fukiyose crossed her arms, lifting her breasts (which were born of an age of plenty) from below, and relaxed her shoulders a little.

“That’s good to hear. I already have plans for the New Year’s season, so I was worried this would cause a conflict.”

“What? Are you one of those people who gets permission to leave the city to visit home for New Year’s?” asked Kamijou.

“No, I visit Mt. Fuji as my first trip of each year.”

“You climb a snowy mountain when no one’s even paying you!? Why do people love causing problems for themselves!? I always thought you looked like an S, but are you actually a complete maso- bgoh!?”

Kamijou’s sentence ended in a pig-like snort because the aforementioned forehead collided with him.

Komoe-sensei’s hands wandered worriedly through the air at the classroom violence she just witnessed, but Fukiyose did not seem to care and asked another question.

“So what are we doing about class? We’ll need a lot of equipment for the esper development stuff, won’t we?”

“That’s the thing.” Komoe-sensei’s smile seemed to hold all the world’s warm light. “After speaking with the others, we’ve decided to borrow the equipment of a high school with lots of empty classrooms. So there’s nothing to worry about.”

Part 2

Akikawa Mie was full of confidence.

She looked like a perfectly normal Academy City middle school girl and she did not gather positive or negative attention. These were perfect traits for someone who wanted to live a safe life, but if they wanted a part in other things (e.g. making an idol debut, becoming an astronaut, or becoming a Level 5 and fighting an evil organization), hers was about the worst position possible.

It was difficult for her to be the talk of her class. If she searched her name online, she found neither praise nor insults. That was a relief, but also kind of sad.

Plus, her school was a combined middle and high school. To be the talk of the school, she had to compete with the high school as well. And a high schooler was something a middle schooler could never hope to defeat. They had overwhelming privileges such as having part-time jobs or riding motorcycles, so Akikawa Mie, who could only buy a train ticket using the IC card loaded with her parents' money, was powerless against them.

But today was different.

Today, she could shine.

(The liquid diamond.)

That treasure was worth six trillion yen and she had a heroic story of running around Academy City to protect it and her family's bonds. The actual incident had left some scars on her heart, but that added to her desire to make some use of it.

(It was at the same time as that comet falling and buildings collapsing and stuff, but there's a lot I can tell everyone. So much I can't even hold it all! Th-this is amazing! Can I really shine this much? Oh, no! I'm gonna be the center of attention!!)

With that in mind, she cheerfully walked into her classroom.

The entire class seemed full of excitement.

She started wondering if a Hollywood offer had already come in, but...

"Hey, did you hear? We're getting three hundred transfer students all of a sudden!"

"I heard another school's just borrowing some empty classrooms. Which is it!?"

"Yeah, yeah, but that's just the high school, right? Still, it'll add to the race for food at the store, so what're we gonna do!?"

They were not talking about her at all.

It was a complete mess.

"Um..."

“Oh, morning, Akikawa-san! Anyway, what did the scouts that went to the faculty room say? This could be bad. If the lunchtime competition goes up too much, maybe bringing our own lunch'll be better.”

“ ‘Anyway’?”

“Hm, was there something else? Oh, the homework? I’ll let you copy my notes later. Now, as I was saying...!!”

The typhoon passed and Akikawa Mie was left all alone as she sat down in her seat.

She felt like crying.

(I guess I can at least brag to Onee-chan.)

She put on a lopsided frown and held back the tears. In the short time before morning homeroom, she used her cellphone to send an email to a girl in the high school.

(I brought you a lunch today too, so let’s eat lunch together.)

She received an immediate reply.

Having someone who would always respond right away was a wonderful treasure. Of course, it was all over if you tried to force others to do that.

However...

“Huh?”

“What is it, Akikawa-san? Did you forget something?”

She gave a vague smile to the boy who asked her that, but she still furrowed her brow.

(She didn’t use the CC today. I wonder why?)

The “Onee-chan” she was emailing had a habit of putting her own address in the CC field. She claimed that let her know whether a server error had failed to send the message or not. That was likely because she knew how devastating communication mistakes could be thanks to her student council work.

Akikawa thought for a moment and then checked the numbers on the edge of the screen.

It was exactly eight in the morning.

And that led her to the answer.

“Maybe she’s not thinking straight due to her low blood pressure again.”

Part 3

Kamijou's school had been destroyed.

However, they were apparently borrowing some rooms at a nearby school.

Having enough empty classrooms to fit the entire student body of another school sounded impressive, but the spiky-haired boy acted like an adult by thinking about economics for once and guessing this actually meant that school was in dire straits financially.

"This means a new age is upon us!!"

Then Aogami Pierce, a relatively unimportant classmate, cut in.

"The failed students of a destroyed school are making a mass migration to a new school, so things are sure to feel cramped!! And who will we find waiting for us but the elite intellectuals who bully for fun and are masters of biting sarcasm!! We're one step away from a great revolution against the wealthy and a school caste battle will begin!! I just know it!!"

"You're twisting the facts to make that fit and we really are just terrible students with nothing going for us."

"Ghh!!"

"And try to think about this from their point of view. If a giant group of failures suddenly shows up out of the blue, becomes a majority of the school, and drags down their average scores, doesn't it make perfect sense that they'd be mad?"

"Stop looking at this so rationally! You have to look at these things from your own point of view and no other!!"

"Oh, don't worry," cut in Komoe-sensei. "We're only borrowing their equipment and the schools aren't combining, so we're completely separate. This shouldn't cause them any problems, so don't worry."

"Our smiling teacher just admitted we're a bunch of morons!!"

"Our smiling teacher just admitted we're a bunch of morons!!"

"Ah wah wah wah wah wah! I think your independence is more important than your test scores," insisted the 135 cm teacher, but they ignored her.

Fukiyose crossed her arms.

“In that case, this will be a mass migration, just like Aogami said.”

“Um, um... We didn’t have time to make printouts for the entire student body, so we’re using your contact numbers to send it to your phones as an email attachment.”

“Then I can tell you now I’m not getting mine,” said Kamijou. “I bet the spam filter or something will go overboard and reject it. That’s the kind of misfortune I’ve come to expect.”

“Wallow in melancholy if you want.”

Fukiyose pointed at him.

No, she pointed at his right shoulder.

“But Kamijou? Why do you have a doll of an embarrassing girl sitting on your shoulder?”

“G-gulp!! Othinuuu

And if Othinus was seen as a homemade girl figurine, wasn't there a risk of High School Teacher Tsukuyomi Komoe confiscating it?

"Mutter, mutter... I didn't think Kamijou-chan was under that much pressure... I always say there isn't anything wrong with being left back once or twice over an entire lifetime, but maybe I should have focused more on his mental care!!"

"See, Othinus? Now I have no idea what to say to these people."

"Not my problem. I don't need anyone but you to understand me. If I'm making a list of what to bring to a desert island, I won't be bored as long as you're at the very top."

"O-oh, dear. You're gonna make me blush. (Kyun)."

"Kami-yan..."

"Why are you speaking to yourself and getting all worked up over it?" asked Fukiyose. "Is this a kind of meditation meant to bring you to greater heights?"

If reality had a flavor, it would be bitter.

The mass migration of the student body had begun, so Kamijou joined their ranks with a smile on his face and tears in his heart. And to prevent a repeat of the same tragedy, he decided on a change of location for Othinus.

"In the pocket you go."

"Mghhh! Human! This uniform is stiff and it scrapes my skin!"

"There's a handkerchief in there, so wrap that around yourself."

With two or three hundred students moving, it was a major event even if they were only walking down the sidewalk. They were not kindergarten or elementary school students and so there was no fear of them running out into traffic if not watched over, but it still was not easy for the teachers leading the way.

"Where is this new school anyway? I hope it isn't too far from my dorm."

"Will we have to take a bus or train?"

"Don't say that, Fukiyose! That'll put even more pressure on my finances!!"

That proved a needless fear as it was less than a kilometer away. That was hardly surprising in Academy City where 2.3 million people were crammed into one city and 80% of the population was made up of students. If you walked around, you would inevitably bump into a school, just like with convenience stores.

“It’s finally time, Kami-yan,” whispered Aogami Pierce. “Are we up against a cruel all-powerful student council? Or will it be the super-popular scholarship class? What can we do against the approaching storm of dazzling good looks and elitism!? They’ll beat us beyond recognition and steal all the girls in the class, but don’t worry. Our time to shine comes later. The bottom-rung students will strike back!! Just you wait until next time!!!!”

“Are you still on about that?”

“But I doubt this will go smoothly. I mean it.”

“You’re probably right about that.”

Even if they were only using the empty classrooms, there would still be competition at the cafeteria and school store and the added people would create more trash and dirty up the floors. Competition over the soccer and basketball goals would also rise. Unless this school had an incredible spirit of volunteerism, Kamijou’s school would only be a nuisance.

“Let’s just pray we don’t end up as an outlet for some weird frustrations.”

“I’m more worried about an insane student council that gathers people together in an alliance against failing students. Curse those popular bastards! They just want to throw someone else under the bus to get all the girls for themselves!! I just know it!!!!”

“And this must be some new fad of yours. ‘I just know it’.”

Meanwhile, they arrived at the school in question.

From outside, it looked newer than the school building they had taken classes in previously. It was also bigger, the grounds were larger, and there were more buildings.

Fukiyose commented on the student she saw through the fence.

“Looks like this is a middle and high school.”

“What?”

“There are two types of gym uniform,” she casually explained. “Since they have enough empty classrooms for us, they must be having trouble keeping students for high school. They must go elsewhere after graduating middle school.”

“We won’t be used as an outlet for that kind of problem, will we?”

“If you beat things down enough, the weeds won’t grow! I just now it!!!!!”

“Aogami, stop trying to turn everything into a war!!”

As they argued, they were pushed through the gate by the students behind them.

They had never expected to begin a new daily life during the end of the year in December.

While it was not as bad as Aogami Pierce, they were all a little worried. Fukiyose and Kamijou were no exception. At times like this, being a lowly Level 0 could be painful. How would they be treated? Could they get along with this school? Would they be laughed at for the textbooks they used? Those were the things they worried about.

“Oh, it looks like their student council is coming out to greet us.”

Aogami shouted “Here it comes!” and grew defensive, which seemed to infect Kamijou too.

Around ten boys and girls were walking out from the building’s main entrance. The ratio of boys to girls was about 2:8. They wore dark gray sweaters and either slacks or a skirt which must have been the high school uniform. Kamijou did not have the eye for clothes to tell the difference in quality between his uniform and prestigious Tokiwadai’s blazer, but he still sensed a hint of elegance from them. For one thing, they were all sparkling. It looked like a ring of straight-A students gathered around a cool and gentle boy with glasses.

“(Curse the enemy! Now, what’ll they say first!?)”

“(Shut up, Aogami!!)”

The idiot speaking up next to him drew attention to Kamijou. His eyes met those of the silky-haired boy. Then they all approached him. He began wondering what to do and thought they might even throw a white glove at him.

But all that thought was wasted.

After all...

“Hello, hello!! Sorry about all the trouble you’re going through. As you can see, we’re just an ordinary school with the good luck to have some spare classrooms, so feel free to use them. We need to help each other out in our times of need, so we look forward to learning together for however long this lasts!!”

.....

They could not help it.

Both Aogami Pierce and Kamijou Touma's expressions grew entirely blank.

Then the representative of idiots asked a question.

"Hey, four-eyes."

"What is it?"

"Isn't there...something more? Don't you have some twisted pride!? Aren't you going to say 'Keh. These failing students have some nerve sullying our holy house of learning.' We were really waiting for something like that!! We were all ready to go! Don't just kindly accept us! You need to have some kind of 'accident' prepared for us!!"

"Well... Just so you know, we have an average score of 65."

"That's really good! Don't get all modest!! You need to announce it with pride and attack the arriving failures! You're good looking, you're smart, and you've got a perfect personality? There's nothing for us to work with there! We're completely useless and incompetent, but we could at least say we had the purest hearts! But now you had to take that away from us!? That's what it came down to with Frankenstein's monster and the Ugly Duckling! That's our last resort! If we can't beat you in that, then what's left for us, Handsome Student Council President!?"

"Oh, um. I'm only the secretary. I could never be the president."

"And can't you at least react when I call you four-eyes!?"

"Honestly, I was more bothered by how you called yourselves useless and incompetent. Nothing good comes from closing off your own possibilities."

"If the secretary is this angelic, the president must be an archangel! All hope is looooooooooooooooooooooooooost!!"

Kamijou fell to his knees on the spot and Aogami Pierce placed a gentle hand on Kamijou's shoulder and shook his head.

The Secretary (boy) tilted his head in utter confusion.

A world without malice was a cruel thing.

"I-is the president maybe a cruel upperclassmen who seems like they're studying to be a tyrant when they grow up?"

"My apologies, I haven't introduced her yet. She is the president. Although she is a little shy, so she almost always hides behind someone's back. Her nickname is Jumpy Bunny. If you sneak up behind her and yell, she hops up in the cutest way."

Even after the introduction, Kamijou could not find her.

Just where was that president hiding!?

“This isn’t right. This isn’t right at all! Isn’t there some kind of major event here!? Like the 0th Student Council that rules the school from the shadows!? Or the perfectly harmless looking secretary who is actually ruling the entire student council with brainwashing!?”

“Um, why would someone want to rule the student council? ...To be honest, we really just take care of odd jobs.”

Oh, no! thought Kamijou.

There really is nothing at this school! And this four-eyes is really just a normal handsome guy!!

“(Can this really happen!? Can he really just be handsome, smart, and kind? The only way to make this work is if he’s secretly a gourmet cannibal who’s been making waves in the news!!)”

“(Don’t be silly, Kami-yan. ...If he’s good-looking, even being a cannibal would work for him. It’s just how the world works. What pisses me off is that they don’t realize that they’re absorbing something from us just by standing there!!)”

Kamijou and Aogami Pierce had become absolute villains, so Fukiyose ignored them and sighed with her arms crossed.

The Student Council President (girl) known as the Jumpy Bunny was apparently hiding behind someone’s back, but she still failed to come out and the Secretary in glasses took the lead as he showed them around the school.

“First of all, we’ve prepared shoe lockers for all of you in the entranceway. You will be using the classrooms here that were already empty.”

“(Where’s the stairway to the secret basement? There has to be something like an unfathomably vast dungeon where they fight monsters every day!)”

“(Hold it, Kami-yan!! If we take the secret in that direction, that student council will be equipped with Japanese swords and magic wands!! That’ll only make them more good-looking! As their mother, I cannot allow them to have a fulfilling life of popularity by day and dungeon exploring by night!! Choose one or the other, dammit! If they introduce me to a 100-level underground labyrinth that changes its layout every day, I’ll run on down to the bottom floor and grab that flat-chested long-lived elf for myself!!)”

“We really should have gathered you all in one part of the school, but unfortunately, we’re just filling in the scattered gaps left by our empty classrooms. We will provide printouts

to each homeroom teacher and class representative, so it would help if you split into classes before heading to the classrooms."

"...?"

"Is something the matter?"

The glasses boy tilted his head when Kamijou stared at him while shoving his shoes into a shoe locker.

Kamijou gave an honest answer.

"Well, you seem pretty used to this. Does the secretary have to do this a lot?"

"Well, the student council really is just a group to handle odd jobs, but the secretary does tend to help official business progress smoothly while also keeping records. Although I mostly just keep the president informed when things get too complicated for her."

The glasses boy glanced in a different direction, but Kamijou and the others could not tell who the president was.

"Also."

"?"

"For better or for worse, we already had a transfer student recently. That may have helped prepare me for this."

"A transfer student?"

"Nothing on as large a scale as all of you. It was just the one person. The one student arrived with the kind of normal transfer request you can find anywhere."

Kamijou heard a solid footstep.

They were passing by a stairway and someone had stopped on the next landing up to look down at them.

"Oh, that's him right there."

Kamijou Touma looked up.

And he saw the boy.

"His name is Kamisato Kakeru. He apparently transferred into Academy City as a whole at this odd time of year. He isn't part of the student council, but he's been helping out some afterschool. We're very grateful."

Part 4

There was an unofficial group known as the Kamisato Faction.

It was no exaggeration to say that nearly every last member was a teenage girl.

Plus, each one of them had some extreme characteristic that could be seen as a unique "world": esper, magician, phantom thief, forensic investigator, pirate, ghost girl, UFO girl, cosplay girl, etc. Their strength came from more than just numbers and they could work together to create convenient combinations that made them incredibly difficult to predict.

Ellen, Claire, and Elza were three girls of the Kamisato Faction and they were gathered on a rooftop overlooking a certain combined middle and high school.

"Oh, dear. Kamisato-san really seems to be enjoying himself."

Claire, a glasses-wearing garden club girl with giant tropical flowers growing from either side of her head, pouted her lips.

"I know he can fit in wherever he goes, but we're his real classmates! Oh, I can't stand it. Maybe I should go surprise him by bringing him a homemade lunch..."

"That's a wonderful idea. I think I'll join you."

"Ellen, any lunch you made would turn the entire school into a contaminated zone the instant he opened the lunchbox. Are you trying to force our boss into some defensive chemical warfare?"

"I know, Elza-han, so how about you make him a lunch since you secretly love cooking so much."

"Eh? Oh, c'mon. I don't love cooking! Or any kind of household stuff!"

"Then I just have to steal it and give it to Kamisato-han to earn some points."

"How would that be your accomplishment!? I'm not going to set things up for you!!"

The three girls argued for a bit, but then they got a phone call.

Ellen tilted her head with her baggy lab coat and ankle-length black hair that provided the silhouette of a ceremonial kimono.

"Who is it?"

“Looks like Fran. The UFO girl.”

“Yeah, it’s Fran, the UFO pajama girl who wears a backpack full of radios, has some kind of self-made implant in her neck, and floats around 24/7 while holding onto a giant balloon with one hand.. She must have ‘intercepted’ something again.”

Even the Kamisato Faction was split over whether Fran had really been abducted by aliens or not, but they all agreed that the UFO-chasing girl knew an awful lot about astronomy and radio waves. Along with Forensic Investigator Ellen, she formed the front line of the Kamisato Faction’s information warfare team.

The three girls stared at the cellphone together and they all gave a displeased look together.

It said the following:

“Mass Murderer Salome’s entrance into Academy City confirmed. She is uncontrollable. All relevant individuals should be on the lookout for friendly fire.”

“Wait, what’s she doing out? Wasn’t she closed up because she was too much to deal with? Y’know, that thing about altering the direction of her consciousness to trap her in an impossible labyrinth in the mental world.”

“Ugh. Either someone removed the electrodes from her head or she’s reached such a level of chaos that cutting of her neurotransmitters isn’t enough.”

“The details don’t matter. The problem is how that mass murderer is walking around free.”

Mass Murderer Salome.

She stood out even among the highly individualistic Kamisato Faction. Whether it was due to being too compatible or too incompatible, that monster had been unable to get along with normal human society. In fact, this girl had broken before the Kamisato Faction even formed.

The three girls thought about this girl and gave their own annoyed comments.

“Kamisato-han’s little sister... This is nothing but trouble.”

“They’re not blood-related, though.”

“Yeah, but that’s what makes it such a pain.”

Part 5

Academy City's District 23 contained an international airport.

An alarm must have sounded because an airport worker rushed into a large passenger plane's cargo room to see what the problem was. He brought a few dogs with him, each one trained to sniff out bombs or drugs. The airport worker had the odd position of a civilian who handled official duties, so he could not carry a gun despite standing on the front line like this. To him, a German shepherd was a much more reliable companion than a baton or stun gun.

But this time, the dogs did not bark much.

They found something truly unexpected in the cargo room.

"Nn..."

The front cargo room was filled with air cargo containers that looked like two meter dice. Unlike the passenger space, it was not air conditioned and the temperature fell by 0.6 degrees for every hundred meters of altitude, so it would become a space of death at an altitude of ten thousand meters. However, the casual voice of a lovely girl seemed to ignore all of that.

"Nnn..."

She was stretching her back and arms like someone who had just woken from a nap.

Just like a CD, her long silver hair seemed to glitter at certain angles and it was rolled up on either side of her head like disks or demon's horns. She was short yet curvy, but the most noticeable aspect was her clothing. Wearing a translucent raincoat over one's nude body was about as bizarre as could be. Two such raincoats formed the silhouette of her outfit(?), but they still defenselessly showed off not just her bodylines but also a blurry view of her skin color. But despite being a sensitive teenager, the eyes of those around her did not seem to bother her. The contrast of a school swimsuit tan line was visible through a blurry translucence much like frosted glass. It might seem like a minor point after that, but she was also barefoot.

Hanging from a thick string around her neck was...what appeared to be a palm-sized pocket watch. Rather than being made of precious metals, it seemed to be a kid's toy from the capsules in front of a candy store or sent as a prize with a magazine. In other words, it was mostly made of cheap plastic.

More than surprise or anger at the suspicious character, and more than embarrassment or bashfulness at the teenage girl exposing her skin, the worker was simply taken aback.

She just seemed hopelessly out of place, like seeing an HD digital broadcast coming in over an old-style black-and-white TV. Even if both things were from the same world, they seemed so separate that he had trouble reconciling them. The gears had slipped out of place. That was how it felt.

The worker finally began to move, but not because he had come back to his senses. Just like a drunk's homing instinct or someone repeating the same action over and over once they stopped thinking, he fled to his duties.

"Y-you! What are you doing here? You can give the details later, but just hurry out of here! How long were you in this deadly cargo room!?"

"Oh..."

He received a smile in return.

However, it felt far more fake than anything one would expect of a smile from an innocent growing girl. It was the smile of a poisonous woman.

"So even when faced with someone this suspicious, you worry about them first? Yes, yes. Such admirable focus on duty. And this isn't because someone told you. It's gotta be because it's so soaked into your being that it came out on reflex. ...Still, if someone this wonderful is stuck in this decidedly un-wonderful life, it's gotta say a lot about modern society's fundamental limits."

"Wh-what are you-...?"

"Take these clothes for example."

From top to bottom, the girl traced a finger down those transparent raincoats that showed her skin color.

"Why do you think I'm wearing this? Surely you don't believe that dream-filled idea that I just have certain special proclivities and love showing off my skin."

"..."

He did not fall silent because he could not think of anything.

He fell silent because he could.

The airport was a dangerous workplace. Since he stood on the front line against smugglers and terrorists, he heard talk of “those industries” a fair bit.

He had heard of criminals who actually had an easier time if they stripped off their clothes.

“But if you’re thinking I’m a drug manufacturer or smuggler, you’re wrong. Nor do I melt down stolen gold or smash stolen diamonds for jewelry laundering. Really, you’ve gotta just throw out anything I could try to hide under my clothes. I also have nothing to do with printing counterfeit money where you can’t let a single fiber of your clothes get mixed in.” The girl slowly placed each possibility between her back teeth and crushed it.

Until only the worst possible one remained.

“That just leaves the big winner: remove your clothes and you won’t get any blood stains on them. You work at an international airport with all the danger that entails, so you’ve gotta know about that, don’tcha?”

“A-ahhh...”

He heard a heavy metallic sound.

The girl carried a long sports bag by its shoulder strap, but he had never heard of a sport with a naked raincoat as the uniform. That bag had to be filled with very different, much heavier, and much more ominous tools.

“Oh, honestly. I guess I could call this sightseeing. I technically have a quota to fill, but it would still be more accurate to say I’m here for pleasure, not business☆”

With the sound of solid objects clattering together, the girl held up a clear bottle the size of a can of coffee. She dumped out what looked like glittering konpeito with spikes sticking out in every direction.

They were made of different-colored glass.

In that case, they may have been more like the caltrops used in samurai stories.

Heavy sounds followed.

The girl’s supposedly soft foot was mercilessly crushing the glass weapons underfoot.

“I don’t know the name of the hotel I’ll be staying at and I don’t remember my medical history. Oh, and if you want to know my criminal history, you should find plenty if you make a search for ‘Mass Murderer’ and ‘Salome’.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Japan’s airports had one major security flaw.

The airport workers could not carry guns, so they could not use any real force until the police or Anti-Skill arrived.

No matter how great a threat stood right before their eyes.

Between the Lines 1

Since eighty percent of Academy City’s 2.3 million residents were students, they had plenty of juvenile halls.

A lot of the criminals used esper powers that could not be easily confiscated, so they were more strictly guarded than even prisons for normal adults. The walls were thick, the metal doors were heavy, and lights flashed while a mosquito noise played 24/7 to keep the espers from focusing. Simply walking through the facility could depress someone, so it was unlikely they were ever opened up for social studies field trips. The place had entirely abandoned its supposed goal of removing the prisoners’ delinquent side and rehabilitating them for life in society.

This was simply a box that closed people away to preserve the public order.

Footsteps echoed down a thick concrete tunnel that looked like a passageway in a giant underground fortress.

“Oh, one question.”

The young male guard forced into guide duty spoke up nervously.

“How did you know she was here? There aren’t any records in any normal archive...”

“Would ‘I’m a Kihara too’ suffice as an answer?”

The guard’s shoulders jumped at the kind voice.

Walking next to him was a woman in a lab coat and cheap suit.

Her name was Kihara Yuiitsu.

She did not have a golden retriever next to her.

He was gone now.

“I haven’t seen her since Baggage City. And that was an unofficial order from me, so I don’t see why she had to end up in juvenile hall afterwards.”

“Um, uh, about that...”

“Yes, I understand.” Yuiitsu laughed and placed something in her mouth. “There was no real reason to imprison her, but she came here of her own free will. As a privately run facility, all that matters is that she pays. An illegitimate confinement and imprisonment on the request of a third party might be a problem, but if someone pays and asks to have herself locked up, this place is really the same as a hotel or inn.”

“Yes, but she is still the most dangerous inmate here.”

The young guard wiped away his seemingly never-ending sweat with a handkerchief and desperately continued the conversation.

“Um, are you sure you want to meet her? She, um, may not be an esper or anything, but...”

“Again, I understand,” cut in Yuiitsu. “And if she wasn’t that way, I would have no reason to speak with her.”

“...”

The two of them arrived in front of a certain cell.

It was not covered with metal bars like a standard cell. It was surrounded by thick concrete walls and a steel door that probably took a lot of heavy work to open or close. To pass in food trays, the door had an oblong metal window that slid open, but it of course could not be operated from within.

Shutting the door and cutting the power would fill the cell with complete and utter darkness.

Humans could not bear a life with no stimulation. Even the most brutal criminal would break within three days in there, but this individual was actually paying to stay there.

“Special Case #15.” called the guard. “Special Case #15! We’re going to release the window, so do as you’re told and stick your hands out!!”

Shouting was meaningless with those thick walls and door, but the young man’s mind would likely have gone blank if he did not follow the manual precisely. He pulled the slide window open to the side and two small hands eventually stuck out. The wrists were together and the palms pointing up. Handcuffing them for transportation before opening the door was the most basic of safety measures. Even if the prisoner had not heard him, she would have known to stick her hands out when the window opened.

The guard crouched down a little to put the handcuffs on.

And that proved a horrible mistake.

“Uuh...gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

He quickly held his eyes and tried to back away, but it was too late. He collapsed onto the floor and violently convulsed in front of Kihara Yuiitsu.

This was clearly abnormal, but those two hands sticking out the window had not actually done anything.

Crouching down had been the mistake.

That had given him a view inside that closed cell.

“What a pain.”

Yuiitsu sighed and approached the cell door. She did not bother collecting the keys from the writhing guard’s waist. She pulled a small card-sized device from her pocket and held it in front of the door. There was no light or noise, but that was enough for the magnetic lock to raise the white flag. Slightly modifying a stun gun to destroy electronic circuits without touching them or producing any sound or light was a well-known tactic.

The thick door opened and light crept in.

The concrete box was neither large nor comfortable. All four walls, the ceiling, and the floor were utterly covered with small writing and numbers. As she read through them one at a time, Kihara Yuiitsu shook her head. That writing could easily smash all of human civilization four or five times over. She had her doubts about how much that uneducated guard had understood, but he seemed to have instinctually grasped that it would reject the world he lived in. And that shock had caused him to pass out.

But Yuiitsu had no interest in that destruction of the world.

She had business with the person who had written it all.

“Enshuu-chan.”

“Hm?”

A small girl stood in front of the door: Kihara Enshuu.

She had been called the failure of her family, but she had a certain strange trait.

She could emulate the thoughts of other Kiharas and lose herself in those roles. And that included the unique techniques of those Kiharas.

Yuiitsu pulled a handheld device, a smartphone, and some other devices from her lab coat's inner pocket and made a suggestion.

"Neh heh. I was tasked with becoming something unique that no one else could catch up to, but I'd still like some fighting power right off the bat. So it'd be great if you would help me juuuuust a little, Enshuu-chan."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to do your usual thing. That one where you show us what a Kihara would do."

Kihara Yuiitsu grinned, placed her pointer finger in front of her lips, and winked.

"Kihara Noukan. I want you to build up an image of the person I need to surpass."

CHAPTER 2

Peace, or a Trap Laid.

Board_Game.

Part 1

"..."

"..."

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru tensely confronted each other.

It was the lunch break and they were speaking in the cafeteria filled with a variety of uniforms.

Why was there a variety of uniforms? There were the uniforms of the original high school, Kamijou's school had poured in, Kamisato was wearing a blazer that did not go to this school, and boys and girls from the middle school were mixed in as well. The middle school always had a lunch supplied for them except on "bring-your-lunch days", but those growing boys and girls were still running down to the cafeteria after finishing off that first lunch.

But...

"Hey, rookie. Can't you act a little more like a final boss?"

"I think you're confused about something. We're only the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere. It's strange for people like us to be in this position in the first place."

With miraculous synchronization, they had both selected their new school's cheapest meal which was known as the Poor Meal.

In other words, the katsuobushi rice.

It did not come with soy sauce, so it really was just chilled stock rice on the verge of going bad with nearly powdered katsuobushi sprinkled on top from a clear package.

“You can’t do that. You can’t be copying me with the Poor Meal. The final boss needs to be looking down on me while chowing down on a steak. And this is the final stronghold for my finances, so if I have to fight you for it, I’ll have nothing at all left. Why did you have to copy me and take my food away?”

“This isn’t easy for me either. Academy City is an away game for me and I have to pay for more than just myself. There’s Ellen, Claire, Elza...and well, I have to look after all of them.”

Kamisato slowly sighed, but Kamijou hung his head for some reason.

His bangs covered his eyes, but a ferocious smile came to his lips.

“Finally...”

“?”

“Finally, finally, finally!! Someone here finally complained about being so popular he’s surrounded by girls!! It finally happeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeened!!”

Kamijou very well may have put more into this yell than when they had nearly started a fight to the death after seeing each other at the stairs earlier.

“Ahh, ahh. You’re hopeless. Do you wish for a new world?”

“Oh, shut up! This new life was such a letdown! Everyone was such a good person that it was just plain boring! But this is more like it!! You need the one intolerable person to keep things interesting!! Placing some orange juice next to a cake will just kill the flavor, but you need that bitterness! Okay, now keep it coming! Give me a cool look and act like what you said was perfectly normal, Mr. Popular!!”

“Can we please just get down to business?”

With a serious look, Kamisato reached for the condiments supplied at the center of the table.

With soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, sugar, pepper, and mayonnaise, it was a fairly standard lineup.

“As it is, we’ll be eating hopelessly dry and flavorless katsuobushi rice. But this is where the fun begins. Now, what toppings will you use to dress up this cheap Poor Meal?”

“What? Can’t you just put the soy sauce on it?”

“Didn’t you just say you liked to keep things interesting? You can’t go wrong with soy sauce on katsuobushi rice, but it can never rise above average either. If I called it a seaweed-less seaweed meal, you’d feel pretty blue, wouldn’t you?”

School lunches were focused on cost effectiveness, so hoping for a surprising flavor and texture was pretty much a lost cause. Nevertheless, these two “normal high school boys” paddled off in their fruitless Age of Exploration.

First up: Kamisato Kakeru (beginner at being poor).

“I’ll start off with some pepper.”

“Isn’t that a little spicy!? You haven’t even decided if you’re making this sweet or salty!”

“Then I’ll settle on an overall direction with mayonnaise.”

“You’re escaping toward bitter!?”

When looking for a surprising flavor, mayonnaise was definitely the standard. As long as one liked mayonnaise, it could make most anything acceptable.

“And I’ll finish it off with a quick sprinkle of Worcestershire sauce for the flavoring of takoyaki or okonomiyaki or something like that. Fwa ha ha. This was a nice curve ball that flew in perfectly for a strike, if I do say so myself.”

But next up was Kamijou Touma (expert at being poor) who was on another level entirely.

“You have to start off with some pickled vegetables, right?”

“!? You have to? But...where did you get those from?”

“I got them from some students I’ve never met before. They come with the meals, but no one ever eats them.”

Kamijou covered his katsuobushi rice with the contents of small plates he had gathered from three or four people at some point and he mixed it all together with his chopsticks.

“Eating the rice like this would be a little salty, so you have to get some shredded cabbage from the people eating chicken cutlets over there.”

“Hey, you people aren’t eating the cabbage before the cutlets? You all need to focus on your health.”

“Then mix it all together for a weaker but crisper flavor and then finish it off by dripping on some mentsuyu borrowed from someone who ordered soba. It comes in a bottle, so there’s usually some left in the bottom after they transfer it over to the bowl.”

“Isn’t that cheating? We were competing using the options here.”

“No one ever said that. I don’t care what it takes as long as I can make the Poor Meal before my eyes look a little richer. Listen, rookie, your mistake was thinking you could find the best possible answer using the ingredients right in front of you. You need to take a wider view of the world! Hah hah!!”

Utterly unable to get along, the two glared at each other while devouring their Poor Meals.

For some reason, a small girl was sitting at the same table as Kamijou and Kamisato.

She looked to be about the same size as Komoe-sensei.

She had a large ribbon in her long black hair and she looked back and forth between Kamijou and Kamisato.

“U-um, are you two...getting along?”

“What is it, little girl? It might look like these Poor Meals are pretty tasty after desperately adding onto them like this, but they don’t taste good in the slightest and it actually adds in a ton of salt. My advice is to stay out of this game if you can. If you can eat a high society grilled fish meal every day, there’s no reason to start down this path of carnage.”

“Is it just me or did you just turn into a scoundrel?”

That was of course because he could not endure this any other way.

If he didn’t go overboard here, all of his effort on his Poor Meal would be for naught. There was simply no way a bamboo spear could defeat a tank.

And that aside...

“I don’t want my grated radish, so you can have it.”

“Oh, thanks, thanks.”

“Do you just put anything someone will lend you on there?”

“You get the fish off the bone really neatly. How elegant.”

“Blush, blush.”

Kamijou ignored the fidgeting little girl and spoke to Kamisato.

“Anyway, Kamisato, have you seen the person who reigns at the top of this school?”

“I’m pretty sure this school doesn’t have Four Magical Lords who rule over the cardinal directions or a Queen of the Underground Esper Fighting Tournament.”

“I’m talking about the student council president. She’s called the Jumpy Bunny. That glasses guy said she was there this morning, but I couldn’t figure out who she was. Not that I expect to need to know.”

Kamijou stirred up his Poor Mix that now had grated radish on the top.

“I only know she’s a girl because of what that glasses secretary said. You arrived here before I did, so have you seen her?”

“Well, yes, I have. I’ve helped out afterschool some.”

“Hold it, Mr. Popular. If you’re making frequent visits to the student council, you’re hardly normal or ordinary! But anyway, what’s she like? As the president, I’m betting she’s like the consummate upperclassman girl, so is she full of tolerance? Y’know, the kind of sexy girl who would fit right in as a dorm manager when she grows up!!”

“Ah, ah, ah.”

“Well...”

Kamisato pointed directly to the side.

He also looked over at the girl who could only be described as “palm sized” or “someone who removes fish bones really neatly”.

“She’s the preside-...”

“Like hell she is. I demand a do-over.”

As soon as the spiky-haired idiot said that, the girl next to him hopped up in her chair.

She trembled with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry I don’t fit the part! But these things are generally decided in an election and someone nominated me half as a joke, so please don’t force your image of the position onto me!! Ah, ah, ah. M-Mie-chaaaaaaan!!”

The palm-sized girl shouted a name with X’s for eyes and a brown-haired middle school girl appeared from the crowd of high school and middle school students. This was the cafeteria, yet she held a wrapped lunchbox. She may have planned to trade food with a friend or acquaintance who got the school lunch. She was already in bourgeois territory.

“C’mon, what are you doing, Onee-cha-...”

The girl trailed off.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she stared at something: Kamijou Touma’s face.

Kamisato Kakeru scooted away a little in his chair.

“(Count me out. I don’t want to let my right hand mess with a girl here.)”

Kamijou ignored the muttering boy.

The middle school girl placed her hands on the small Jumpy Bunny’s shoulders from behind and hesitantly spoke to him.

“U-um, I’m Akikawa Mie. Do you...remember me?”

After retreating outside their personal space, Kamisato watched with interest to see what Kamijou, his “predecessor”, would do here.

The spiky-haired boy’s answer was simple.

“Who?”

“Ahh!?” shouted the supposed student council president. “Y-you can’t say that to M-Mie-chan! She’s at that adolescent age where she thinks she’s something special, so you need to treat her kindly even when she starts acting like everyone knows who she is!! That’s the standard!!”

“Yeah, but I’m not Index and I don’t have a perfect memory recording everyone I pass by on the street.”

“What a pain,” sighed Kamisato. “But you could at least play along, you know? When someone asks if you remember them, you can’t just say no. Are you the kind of person who ignores the looping dialogue and keeps choosing ‘No’ at the ‘Will you go defeat the Demon King?’ screen? Still, I guess this at least tells me you aren’t the stereotypical type that tries to get close to every girl he lays eyes on.”

“Um, aren’t you two doing more damage to her than me? It looks like she’s dehydrating down on the ground there. She’s drying up.”

Kamijou’s senses appeared to be in working order, yet Akikawa Mie really did seem to be growing gray and dried out.

“I just had a bunch of stuff thrown at me at once and it’s about as tangled up as power cables tend to get, but let’s go over this one thing at a time. Is that little thing really the student council president? And of the high school!? Ehh!?”

“Why do you sound so disappointed!? This isn’t about your school! And I was only nominated by someone else and everyone really only voted for me as a joke!!”

“Hmm. So it’s something like that legend about sending your little brother to give the idol agency your resume and he ends up becoming an idol? So you too have an extreme ‘characteristic’ that gives you your own ‘world’.”

Kamisato was muttering something, but Kamijou had more pressing issues.

Namely, his dreams!

“This is a problem!”

“What is!?”

“A female student council president is supposed to be a trifecta of beautiful, a genius, and rich! And I don’t mean a girly kind of beautiful! I mean the consummate upperclassman type who’s a mature kind of sexy!! Now I know why I didn’t see you when I looked around. You were too small!! Why are you palm-sized!? I don’t get it!!”

“I-I already told you I’m not the president by choice... I was forced to do this...”

“Gasp!? ...Wait! Do you maybe have a Metamorphosis power that gives you a dynamite body but only in dark pools during the full moon? It’s a bit of a curveball, but you can’t rule it out here in Academy City.”

“Sorry, but I only have Level 2 Pyrokinesis. Sorry I can only create fire like normal...”

“O-oh, no. That’s so middle-of-the-road... Should I not have asked that? I mean, shouldn’t the president be either a Level 0 or a Level 5?”

“Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah!!”

Unable to take it any longer, teary-eyed Jumpy Bunny (nickname) clenched her fists and began lightly pummeling him.

That brought a question to mind: who was she anyway?

Akikawa Mie finally recovered from her gray dried-out state, so she unsteadily got up and whispered to the palm-sized student council president.

“C’mon, Onee-chan. You need to introduce yourself.”

“Oh. I’m Keshouin Asuka.”

“Well, at least your name’s big.”

“Um, uh, I was trying to contact the two rumored problem students who were considered most likely to cause trouble among the transfer students. So...are you two getting along?”

Kamijou and Kamisato both grimaced.

In this case, they did not care if they were seen as a problem student liable to cause trouble.

They pointed at each other with their mysterious right hands.

“Are you saying I’m the same as this ******* bastard!?”

“Are you saying I’m the same as this ******* bastard!?”

“Eek!! Ah, ah ,ah! Mie-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!”

Not long after arriving at this school, both Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru earned the trophy of “Boy who Made the Student Council President Cry.”

Part 2

He always got nervous in front of banks.

“Hamazura, what are you doing?”

“Well, I’m not wearing a knit hat and sunglasses, so I guess they won’t sound the alarm.”

It was well-known that a convenience store or bank would call the cops if you wore any kind of face-covering fashion. People had fallen victim to that with the black masks that were fashionable lately. But in his delinquent days, Hamazura Shiage had heard whispers of something else.

Namely, if a group with mohawks and shaved heads entered a store, the alarm could ring even if they were not covering their eyes or mouth.

Hamazura Shiage and Takitsubo Rikou were walking side by side.

“I hate this. It makes me as nervous as walking through the shoplifting prevention gate after buying an adult magazine. It’s not like I’ve done anything wrong.”

“Hamazura, a real gentleman wouldn’t mention that in front of a girl.”

The boy with hair dyed brown and a nose piercing walked through the glass automatic door as the pink track suit girl’s words stabbed into him.

It was early afternoon, so more people were gathered at the ATMs than the reception counter. Due to the time, there were far more university students than middle and high

school students. Were they receiving an allowance or depositing money somewhere? He could not tell what they were doing as they curled up their back and hit the buttons.

The reception counter was almost deserted. An afternoon talk show was playing on a flat screen TV next to all the posters for things like ISAs.

“I’ll fill in the form, Hamazura, so you go get the paper with the reception number.”

“Sure thing.”

He walked away from short black-haired Takitsubo Rikou and approached the machine next to the counter. He pulled out the small paper that stuck out like a lantern monster’s tongue and it looked like they only had to wait for three people.

(So today’s guest is Hitotsui Hajime. I guess they target the housewives at this time of day.)

He had no interest in the TV, but he could not change the channel either.

He sat on the sofa and reached for the magazine rack. An auto magazine with a cover story about a motor show caught his interest, so he flipped through it.

They were at the bank for a simple reason. Mugino Shizuri, Kinuhata Saiai, Takitsubo Rikou, and the late Frenda Seivelun had all distributed their reward money from the main Item bank account to their individual ones, but they were canceling their contract with that main one and money not needed for living expenses would periodically be deposited in Takitsubo’s personal account.

The processing done on the computer would be perfectly normal. It would be one task out of countless similar ones done every day in Japan and the entire world.

But it was a meaningful action.

Takitsubo was choosing to let go of the account that Item had used to receive payments for their dirty work. And by making periodic deposits, she was focusing on her future at least a little bit. Instead of grabbing at what money she could get in the moment, she was looking at the life made up by connecting those points into a line.

Those girls had a way of rising above the clouds if he let his guard down a little, so uncouth Hamazura had difficulty grasping what they were really after. But he was glad to have this slight sign, even if it was not as simple as a facial expression or actual words. His fingers felt light as he flipped through the magazine.

But then someone must have violently thrown themselves over onto the sofa. They sank deep down into the cushion right next to him.

He looked over, feeling a little pissed, and he saw something at about 120% on the danger meter.

It was a girl wearing translucent raincoats over her bare skin.

“Ah...”

At first, all normal emotions were blasted from his mind.

His blank mind could not come up with a proper reaction to this incredibly absurd girl.

“Abweh!?”

The girl had the waterproof hood over her head and swimsuit-like tan lines were visible through the raincoats, but she did not seem to care about the boy’s eyes on her. She tossed aside a heavy-looking sports bag and elegantly crossed her slender legs. She was barefoot, so he could see her toes clenching and unclenching.

She held something in her mouth which he initially thought was the kind of lollipop Fremea liked, but then he realized it glittered with a dull silver light.

(A pizza...cutter...?)

She rose another notch on his mental danger meter.

It may have looked surreal at first and it may not have seemed nearly as bad as a brutal and “professional-looking” knife combined with brass knuckles, but that was wrong.

From a cost-effectiveness standpoint, kitchen tools were much more efficient blades.

There were all sorts of knives and police batons, but most of those found online or in shops were just for show. The knives were often little better than paper knives, the batons would often bend after two or three hits, and the stun guns would often fry their circuitry the instant they were switched on. So instead of a big combat knife that costs twenty or thirty thousand yen, a thousand yen kitchen knife from the supermarket could be far sharper. And if it was something mass-produced, it was harder to trace back to you. His knowledge from his delinquent days (if he could call it that), was telling him this girl knew what she was doing.

She placed a hand on the grip and pulled the round blade from her mouth.

She was carefree enough to hum, so she looked like a resident of some fantasy world.

“Hamazura Shiage. If Sunny and Rain’s information is accurate, I’ve gotta count you as a candidate.”

“What...?”

He did not care what this raincoat girl had to say.

This absurd person knew his name. That alone was a big deal.

She laughed with her skin color showing through.

“Well, that doesn’t matter. It’s none of your concern anyway, Hamazura-chan. So where are you headed today?”

She ignored the boy’s confusion and her amethyst eyes glittered with belligerence and curiosity.

“Are you still an errand boy for Item or whatever it’s called? It’s like being a celebrity’s tool. But Hamazura-chan, no matter how far you go, you’ll still be Hamazura Shiage. Even if you crush yourself down to a powder, you can’t become a part of Mugino Shizuri or Kinuhata Saiai. You haven’t built up anything in your own life. You’re more like the disposable engine that gets ejected from the rocket, don’tcha think? When the celebrity reaches the stars above, you’ll be tumbling back to earth as nothing more than Hamazura Shiage. Make no mistake there.”

“...”

Mugino Shizuri and Kinuhata Saiai.

The position and behavior of those within Item.

They had sealed their information off from the city’s dark side as best they could, but she brought it up so easily.

“And you can say the same thing on a larger scale, don’tcha think?”

“What...?”

“No matter how far you go, you’ll still be Hamazura Shiage. You can stick with Mugino Shizuri or Takitsubo Rikou and you can face the same way as Kamijou Touma and resolve incidents like that, but that doesn’t make you a force of good. You won’t become the world’s most powerful and you won’t make everyone accept you. From birth to death, humans only exist *as individuals in an organization*. You can’t ignore the whole to become a free individual and you can’t ignore the individual to become the powerful whole.”

“What...do you know?” Hamazura gulped. “Unofficial documents wouldn’t be enough for this. Mugino and Kinuhata, maybe. But just pursuing Item wouldn’t show you the line connecting me to Takitsubo. So...”

“Hm? Oh, this isn’t my information. It comes from Sunny and Rain, the Weather Girls.”

The raincoat placed her arms on the sofa back and enjoyment filled her voice.

“Now, I’ve gotta assume I can’t fool you by answering a question with a question. Plus, I’m betting you know I’m not just any old stranger. You’ve gotta be suspecting I’m *someone far from friendly*. So what’ll it be, Extra-chan who acts big but hasn’t left any footprints of his own? Now that I’m this close, there isn’t much left you can do, don’tcha think? One: play your role as a tool and buy time for Takitsubo Rikou to escape. Two: abandon your role and run as fast as you can to survive. Three: yes, you could collapse bloodily in front of Kamijou Touma and pass on some kind of dying message. Yeah, I think that about sums it up.”

He was a disposable tool to keep Item running smoothly.

He was someone who faced in the same direction as someone else to gain the same justification they had.

He was someone without a “self”.

“Surely you don’t think you can use this trouble to your advantage by protecting your girl and showing off how cool you are, normal person.”

“…”

Hamazura Shiage slowly exhaled.

He spoke to the alternate world located just thirty centimeters away.

“None of that matters.”

The raincoat girl looked at him in actual surprise.

If he had made a bluff to cut off their conversation, she would have mocked him. In fact, she might have even responded with direct violence.

“Back when I was a Skill Out leader, that probably would’ve really gotten to me. I really wanted some status for myself, I wanted everyone to think I was great, and I wanted their attention. I thought I couldn’t maintain my ‘self’ otherwise.”

But he had been wrong.

Hamazura Shiage spoke from the heart.

“But when you get down to it, your ‘self’ doesn’t matter. Those people who wander around seriously talking about trying to ‘find themselves’ are a bunch of morons. ‘Yourself’? What’s that worth? Ignore it and it’ll catch up to you on its own. People say they want to be something special, but I just want to ask them why they care.”

"..."

"I mean, being normal is a hell of a thing." He breathed out. "Just walking along the normal rails like normal is pretty damn amazing. People get derailed by the smallest pushes from the side. After all the stupid crap I did out on the streets at night, I know that all too well. And Mugino and Takitsubo were lurking in the shadows beyond that, so they were even worse. I'm probably the worst kind of person for acting so smug after taking someone else's lifestyle away from them, but I don't want to turn out like that and, if they start heading back in that direction, I'll do whatever it takes to stop them. Isn't that really important?"

Hamazura Shiage was colorless.

No one would notice him if he was not standing next to someone with incredible individuality.

That was his starting point, but he did not end there.

"No matter how far I go, I'll still be a Level 0. Nothing I can do will make me someone special," he said. "But so what? If you don't turn out special no matter what happens, you never stray from your path, and you can't be shaken from your position as 'normal', doesn't that make you more powerful than anyone?"

"Hmm. I see..."

The raincoat girl laughed.

It was a somewhat softer laugh than the earlier mocking laughter.

"You've got it worse than I thought. It sounds logical, but you're really just completely dependent on them, don'tcha think?"

"Probably. ...Ahh, ahh. Even I realized that partway through saying it all. I'm probably just like those corporate slaves who only have their company logo to cling to. And I'm not even suffering and trying to escape it. I'm actually glad I'm a corporate slave, so I've got a terminal case."

Hamazura still did not try to make himself look good, so the girl slowly stood up with her translucent raincoats showing of her naked body and its tan lines.

The bottom of the double raincoats spread out like a jellyfish or clione floating in the ocean.

Hamazura gave her a puzzled look.

"What's this? You're not gonna do anything? I mean, I'd prefer not to have a fight to the death with a stranger here, but still."

“I decided not to. I doubt I’d gain much from attacking you. *You don’t fit my objective.*”

She grabbed the cheap children’s pocket watch hanging from her neck.

She kissed it before continuing.

“But I’m not a kid running an errand, so I would like ‘something else’ instead.”

“Something else?”

“A sign. You could call it a demonstration if you want. And a bank’s gotta be convenient as far as that’s concerned. Robbery, breaking into the vault, seducing some money out of them, exchanging counterfeit money, digging a tunnel in, and even hacking. The place is a symbol of security, so it’s gotta give you a name as a criminal if you can attack a bank and get out safely. Maybe it’s like a treacherous mountain that gives you plenty of prestige if you scale it.”

“Hey!” yelled a deep voice.

Had no one noticed before or had they ignored her because she was being so bold about it? With only raincoats over her tan-lined naked body, the girl could not have been more suspicious and the guards were finally reacting to her.

“Here we go.”

The girl looked around while lifting up the heavy sports bag that could have contained just about anything.

“Nonlethal? How boringly moral. If they put up a little bit more of a fight, I could enjoy this *snack* some more.”

She had no interest in the men armed with police batons and stun guns.

She was staring beyond the counter.

The giant round door there led to the vault.

“Yes, if I’m gonna destroy something, it’s gotta be that.”

Hamazura felt a strange tremor run down his spine.

At the same time, his mind searched for and pulled out some information to help protect him during this crisis. It was a lot like his life flashing before his eyes. He had a quick flashback of memories and knowledge.

It was from when Fremea Seivelun was being pursued by Kuroyoru Umidori and Silvercross Alpha of the Freshmen. To protect that young girl from the Five Over Model Case Railgun, hadn't he taken her to a bank vault?

The lock, the rods, and the hinges.

She listed them off as if in praise, yet she ignored them all.

She stuck her tongue out again.

She licked along the edge of the pizza cutter's round blade and guided it between her lips.

A breaking sound followed.

The catastrophe spoke in human words.

"External Offering. I offer a weapon up to Sea God Manannán to receive his blessing."

Only the result will be provided here.

Ignoring both the door and the thick walls, the entire bank building tilted diagonally.

Part 3

The first afternoon class was gym and today that meant a marathon.

The boys and girls of Kamijou's class were driven out of the school.

"Pant, pant! This isn't right! Why is our long-distance race or marathon or whatever turning into a scene from a winter poem? I mean, don't even pro baseball players avoid training too hard in the winter because they'll hurt themselves!?"

"You can talk that much while you run? Pant, pant. Are you actually pretty fit, Kami-yan?"

"Is that thanks to being chased through the streets at night by strange delinquents all the time!? That doesn't make me at all happy!!"

Kamijou and Aogami Pierce were not the head of the pack; they were running more casually toward the tail end of the middle group. But they could keep running while yelling back and forth, so they had some decent stamina when compared to those in the back holding their sides after eating too splendid a lunch.

"Anyway, Kami-yan. Have you heard about the system this school uses? They have a tutoring system for the middle and high school."

“I think Fukiyose mentioned that. Getting a tutor for free sounds convenient, but I’m betting it’s meant as a way to get more middle schoolers to stick around for high school. This’ll stop them from choosing some other school after they graduate middle school. In that way, it’s probably pretty restrictive.”

“When I heard about a system where upperclassmen give one-on-one lessons to their underclassmen, white lily flowers filled my mind. Does that mean I should go get an MRI done?”

“No, I’d recommend you get counselling or become a monk. And this isn’t limited to girls, so there’d be man-to-man tutoring too.”

“Gwah!? We’re not talking about the leftovers at the folk dance here! Why...? Why don’t they allow boy/girl crossovers instead!?”

“Probably because they’re worried about the exact scenario in your head.”

But how would that really turn out?

Sure, receiving one-on-one lessons from a perfectly beautiful and kind dorm manager type with breasts about to burst from her top, a glimpse of a garter belt at her thighs, and whose usual elitism was balanced out by some airheadedness would be paradise, but what about the reality that did not allow for those sorts of dreams?

Kamijou and Aogami Pierce went straight home without any club activities, so would an upperclassman who mercilessly violated their private study time really be that welcome a presence?

“Well, I think it’s about time for a serious spurt. I’m going on ahead!”

“Eh? What’s got you so hot-blooded all of a sudden, Aogami!?”

“Don’t be silly, Kami-yan. We’re with the girls for gym today, and you know what a girl’s marathon means, right? Lots of bouncing and jiggling!!”

“Y’know, I bet you could save a galaxy or two if you directed that power of yours in a worthwhile direction.”

“In this world, defeating the Great Demon King and saving every galaxy in the universe won’t even get you a single kiss as a reward. But I’ve realized something: You can’t see bouncing and jiggling when following from behind! It’s meaningless if you’re not looking at it from up ahead!! Thus I must stand at the very top! To lay eyes on all the bouncing and jiggling!!!!!”

With intense footsteps, Aogami Pierce’s back grew smaller up ahead. He was running like a sprinter even though this was a marathon, but his sense of pain had likely been numbed by all the dopamine and endorphins his brain was pumping out. He would probably pass

out from oxygen deprivation before he reached the top, so Kamijou made a mental note to not step on him.

(Come to think of it, what ever happened to Tsuchimikado? I forgot to ask Kamisato about that.)

“Hey, human.”

“Oh, the Othinus Hell. Something else I forgot about.”

“Thanks for the kind greeting. I made sure to stay quiet in your pocket, if you didn’t notice.”

“Wait...no...no! Where were you while I was changing, Othinus? Don’t tell me you saw everything...!!”

“~ ~ ~ ~!! That was your fault for forgetting about me and changing without warning! Do you have any idea how I felt with nowhere to run!?”

Their rank did not matter as long as they finished the marathon by the end of class, so Kamijou stopped by the side of the course to focus on his conversation with Othinus.

“That was peaceful. You contacted Kamisato Kakeru, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. If he’d noticed you in my pocket there, the world might’ve been destroyed a little.”

He belatedly realized how dangerous the cafeteria scene had been.

“But do you really think Kamisato set all this up? Was he waiting for me and did he have anything to do with the selection of a new school for us? But it was the High Priest who destroyed our school and there would have been a large random aspect to the replacement school chosen by Komoe-sensei and the other teachers. Not to mention that he wouldn’t have expected the conclusion of our run-in last night. If he thought that would happen, wouldn’t he have come up with a different attack plan?”

“Yes. If he could think this far ahead, he could have laid in wait a little better and he would have set up a situation where he wouldn’t have lost.”

Othinus readily admitted it while sitting on his shoulder.

“But that doesn’t matter if he’s just really good at adlibbing. If this was just a stroke of good luck for him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he uses it to its fullest and comes to tear down your stronghold. And luckily for him, you’re sharing a school life now, so he can attack whenever he wants.”

“...”

"You saw his methods last night. To be blunt, *he's more like me than you*. Do you remember Magic God Othinus who ruled Gremlin? I gathered both science and magic, toyed with enemy and ally alike, and treated the entire world as expendable to fulfill my objective. Kamisato Kakeru has no sanctuaries. You might want to say that's impossible, but you can't say things like that here. Remember that a god once razed the entire world and tore out its softer parts all to break you and you alone."

"It's that bad...?"

"It is," she insisted. "Whether it was intentional or not, we both gained a unique power that created a distortion and then tried to revert that to the way it was. I know what that's like. To people like him, the world before his eyes looks shallow, so he has no interest in any sacrifices or damage done to his surroundings. He feels like he's living on a movie or drama set, so he feels no guilt. He will not hesitate to destroy anything within reach if it will accomplish his goal. If he needs to cause a citywide power outage to pry open a vault, he'll ignore the newborns in the hospital and the oxygen machines in the assisted living homes as he flips the switch."

Kamijou slowly breathed out.

"I don't think he would go that far."

"Oh? Can you tell me what you do think?"

"If he really felt nothing, I don't get why he would work to save the Birdway sisters."

"Like I said, he sees it like a movie or drama." Othinus sounded exasperated. "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. ...*Even so, you don't want to see a tragedy*. If he can change it, he will. But that's all. If your score goes up or your remaining lives go down in a video game, it isn't going to affect your real life. But when you see those numbers on the screen, *the blood rushes to your head, doesn't it?* So be careful. His empathy and passion are light. He might sob with a handkerchief in hand at one point and then flip the switch for his own objective later on. Just like an entertainer that looks so surprised during each and every cup noodles ad. You need to assume yesterday's understanding won't necessarily be reflected in today's behavior."

Kamijou Touma did not know Kamisato Kakeru that well either.

He was not an expert profiler, so he could not determine the truth and depth of everything someone said.

But.

He found himself unable to agree with Othinus so easily. Kamisato was definitely an enemy. He was a danger who would not hesitate to destroy Kamijou Touma's right arm and mercilessly kill Othinus as the last remaining Magic God.

But could he deny the part of that boy that had worked to save the Birdway sisters?

Kamisato may have been misguided in his anger concerning the girls he wanted to protect, but wasn't that a line he wouldn't stray from unless he found something truly deserving of it?

Othinus gave an exasperated sigh on Kamijou's shoulder.

"Don't tell me you're letting Kamisato get to you."

"Eh?"

"You have to be kidding me... As you can see from the unique fighting force surrounding him, Kamisato Kakeru is quite adept at controlling people's hearts. And I bet it's more than him being a good talker. Heh. The kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere, is it? He claims to be a representative of the common folk *and he makes himself look weak to garner empathy*, but this goes beyond that. Call it an aura or charisma if you like, but he has the look of someone with that invisible characteristic."

"..."

"Kamisato Kakeru isn't as simple as he looks. If you're a natural diamond that has miraculously struck a nice balance, then he's an artificial diamond that reproduces that in a lab. They both shine just as bright, but let it charm you and you'll be swallowed up."

Kamijou gulped...and then looked puzzled.

"Wait, Othinus. That doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

"Well, if he's an artificial diamond and I'm a natural diamond, that would mean I have something just like he does. And you're not talking about a special right hand that draws people to you. Do you really think a normal high school boy like me has that kind of aura or charisma or whatever?"

"Okay, okay. I get it. You really are oblivious, aren't you?"

"?"

Just as Kamijou tilted his head, a girl spoke to him from behind.

"What is it, Kamijou? Are you feeling ill since we just had lun-...oh."

It was Fukiyose Seiri in her short-sleeve gym outfit.

That black-haired forehead classmate gave him a lukewarm look when she saw Othinus on his shoulder.

“Kamijou, that is a characteristic of yours, not a flaw. But can you please think more carefully about when you bring it out?”

“Okay, I’m just gonna say it now! Othinus is not a doll dressed in a risqué outfit. Come here and touch her. Then you’ll see.”

“I can understand liking to look at dolls, but touching them is going a little far... And isn’t forcing a girl to do that a form of sexual harassment?”

“Human. Do you really think a god will let someone other than her Understander touch her?”

“And after demanding I do it, you reject me using ventriloquism? You’re too far gone for me to interfere. And your cute doll calls herself a god? How am I supposed to approach a classmate like this?”

“Help me, god!! I’m about to be placed in some strange category!!”

Kamijou was nearly in tears, but despite claiming to be his Understander, Othinus stubbornly refused to leave his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Fukiyose seemed to realize pushing this was not going to help, so she changed the subject.

“By the way, Kamijou, do you know anything about the transfer student?”

“What? Aren’t there a whole bunch of us?”

“We’re only borrowing the building, so we’re technically not transfer students.” Fukiyose calmed her breathing. “What was his name? Kamisato Kakeru I think. You know him, don’t you? I heard some of your conversation in the cafeteria.”

“...”

“Kamijou?”

“Well,” he stalled.

Hearing a classmate speak Kamisato’s name caused his heart to jump more than he had expected. That name felt like it belonged in the realm where terms like “magic” and “Magic God” were normal.

“But from what I heard, it didn’t seem like a very cheerful conversation. He seems like he would just get buried without the term ‘transfer student’ helping him out. I kind of feel bad with all of us pushing him out of the way.”

“He doesn’t like to stand out, so I bet he’s actually thankful.”

“I hope so.”

She may have been worried about that.

She was a considerate classmate.

But if Kamijou did not get back to the marathon soon, he might not be able to finish by the end of class. He leisurely ran along the designated course with Fukiyose.

“Y’know, I would have thought you were used to jogging, Fukiyose. But since you were slower than me, are you actually below average?”

“This is to maintain my health. I’m not about to stress my body in a mad dash for the best time. I care more about maintaining my pace than getting a decent rank.”

He realized she was not breathing heavily and her muscles did not look tensed. He guessed she could compete for a top spot if she took this seriously.

And when she noticed him watching her from the side, she gave him a suspicious look.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“_____”

This was not entirely his own fault. Or he wanted to believe it was not.

This misfortune had come from his surroundings.

One: Fukiyose Seiri mentioning that he was “staring” directed his attention to what lay before his eyes.

Two: Before running off earlier, Aogami Pierce had repeated a certain phrase in his mad ravings: bouncing and jiggling.

His classmate’s expression transformed from suspicious to blank and she asked a wooden question.

“Are they that fascinating?”

Kamijou Touma gave an honest answer.

“They are!!”

A truly honest headbutt reached him a moment later.

Part 4

The color orange was thick.

It was afterschool and, since it was December, the sun set early. Students were pouring out of the school building for club activities, committee activities, or to have fun outside of school. The entire scene was dyed in the orange of sunset.

Kamijou Touma was not a part of a club or committee and had nowhere else to go, so he was walking through the school’s campus.

He held a large bag of burnable trash and another of non-burnable trash.

(Um, I just have to take it here, right?)

There was a trash dump near the back gate for faculty. He had been told where it was, but he was still a little nervous walking there for the first time. Fortunately this was not a special class or anything, so he had no time limit.

Since no one was there, Othinus poked her head out of his pocket.

“Nnn.”

“Othinus.”

“If you have a problem with this, ask yourself why that might be. And at least don’t hold the bag of burnable trash on my side. It reeks of kitchen waste! What is in this container? Yakisoba? Fried chicken!?”

Othinus complained as she climbed his arm to his shoulder. His shoulder moved up and down a fair bit given her size and her balance was poor, but she seemed to have decided that was her spot.

“There wasn’t anything like you were saying. Kamisato didn’t show any sign of attacking me.”

“I have no obligation to tell you this, but things are seriously wrong from the moment that Kamisato Kakeru is living a normal life in a city as strictly managed as this.” Othinus sounded exasperated. “It may be hard for you to grasp since you’ve lived here for so long, but that would put a large burden on him on the technological, informational, and

monetary fronts. And that's even if the Board of Directors decided to overlook him. That means he must have some reason for being here. He couldn't do this just because he didn't feel like leaving quite yet."

"Is that really-...?"

Kamijou trailed off and quickly rewrapped his scarf.

He wrapped it around Othinus to hide her inside. He thought he heard something like a "Bgh!?", but he had a more pressing issue.

Simply put, there was already someone at the trash dump.

The space was shared by the middle and high school, so there were some impressive piles of garbage bags. The space was the size of two classrooms, but the bags were piled up higher than a human being in some places. Someone could easily get buried if there was an earthquake.

Due to the drink packages and sweet bread wrappers from the school store, the entire place was surrounded by a sweet aroma.

The person he had seen was in the valley created between two mountains of trash.

She wore her uniform and had plastic gloves on her hands.

It was the student council president with long hair, a large ribbon, and the same small size as Komoe-sensei.

"Hi, hi. How are you...liking our school? Some spaces are shared between the middle and high schools, so it can be more confusing than a normal school and you might get lost."

"Not to worry. The facilities are actually better than our old school."

She must have been relieved to hear that.

But...

"You told me your name, didn't you? What was it again?"

"Were you...tasked with cleaning up today?"

"Oh, right. It was Jumpy Bunny."

"Just so you know, that's slang or a type of unofficial- ow! I bit my tongue... A-anyway, that isn't the kind of nickname you should use in front of me!!"

She seemed to defy gravity when worked up over something because she started hopping up into the air.

Kamijou ignored Othinus as she squirmed inside his scarf and gave a curious look to the girl's plastic gloves.

"Why are you here, president?"

"You're not even trying to learn my name, are you!? M-M-..."

"?"

"Mie-chaaaaaan!! Wahhhhn!!"

The Jumpy Bunny seemed to call for that middle school girl when she grew too emotional because she began operating her cellphone with the plastic gloves still on. The response came with incredible speed. Even the predictive shortcuts did not explain that speed, so the conversation was probably being held with only symbols and emoticons.

And the president grew petrified as soon as she opened the email.

Worried about the unmoving palm-sized girl, Kamijou hesitantly peered over her shoulder at the phone.

"Mi-ke> You're running to me too easily, Onee-chan. (-_-+) Am I your servant? (／口°) ／～E *crashing tea table*"

"B-bgfh...wahhhh..."

"I really don't think this is worth sobbing like a pig and crying over, president. You said at lunch that she's an adolescent, right?"

"Fghfh. I'm going to ask Mie-chan to hang out with me to make up for this, so you be quiet. And this definitely isn't me going into beggar mode with a middle schooler because I'm afraid she'll run out of patience with me."

When he placed a soothing hand on her shoulder, her sobs gradually quieted down. And while the spiky-haired boy was acting like he knew what he was talking about, he too fell into the adolescent category.

At any rate, it seemed that shared troubles helped bring people together.

The Jumpy Bunny spoke while sniffling and rubbing her red nose.

"Sniff... A-anyway, um, this is part of my usual student council duties. ...It's one of our odd jobs."

“Hm?”

“Separating the trash.” She pointed here and there. “It’s generally divided between a burnable pile and a non-burnable pile, but some people dump aluminum foil and other things in because separating it out is too much work.”

“Oh...”

Kamijou looked over at the trash bags, but he did not notice any real problems from what he could see through the translucent bags.

“Well, Academy City’s garbage processing facilities do a lot of recycling too. They of course compost the kitchen waste and recycle old paper, metal, and plastic, but they also do urban mining...that is, recycling the micro-sized rare earths inside electronic circuits. They use air, magnetism, static electricity, and centrifugal separation. ...But I’d still like to prevent anyone from throwing away a broken utility knife blade or a hairspray can.”

“Ugh. People are that careless?”

It was easy enough for the person throwing it away, but in some cases, it could blow off a finger of the garbage man who came to collect it. After all, to increase efficiency as much as possible, the trash bags were crushed with a powerful press inside the garbage truck.

“Um, uh, there are over five hundred people here if you count both the middle and high school. And it might help that it can’t be traced back to them like it can with household trash. It was suggested we write the class numbers on the bags, but for some reason there was a lot of opposition and it was denied...”

“But...”

Kamijou followed the Jumpy Bunny’s pointed instructions to casually toss his two bags into the appropriate piles.

“This space is for both the middle and high school, right? I don’t see why the high school student council president would have to go this far.”

“The middle school is really just ‘attached’ to the high school, so all of the responsibility falls on the high school. Also...”

The plastic gloved president slowly exhaled.

“Even if I don’t have to do it, um, the danger will be overlooked if no one does it. And that means someone has to do it.”

“...”

Kamijou looked around the area now that he had finished his job.

It was the size of two classrooms and the piles were taller than he was in places.

“Do you want some help?”

“Ah hah hah. It’s a hundred years too early for that. Plus, I’ll be done for the day once I check the ones you just brought.”

He looked at the extraordinary piles of trash once more.

She had already checked through all that on her own?

“I’m growing every day.”

“Um... Sorry, but where?”

“Could you not leer all over my body like that? Especially when we just met today!!”

The Jumpy Bunny crossed her arms to protect her unimpressive chest and shrunk down with tears in her eyes.

“I did think about opening them all by hand at first, but, um, I pretty quickly realized that wouldn’t work.”

“Yeah, I would think so.”

But she apparently did things differently now.

As for how...

“The really dangerous things like utility knife blades and spray cans are generally made of metal, right? So I ordered a cheap metal detector. That gives me a general idea of where they are just by bringing the device in close.”

“I see.”

“N-not that that actually separates it all perfectly! But as I said, Academy City does some really good recycling, bordering on urban mining, so it’s all about give and take. And if you give me an impressed look like that, I can’t help but agree with you!!”

“Oh, so you weren’t using some kind of rare power...”

“Why do you keep taking jabs at me today!? Did I do something to you!?”

“Gyaaaah!! Don’t grab at me with those dirty plastic gloves!! Is this a new kind of biochemical terrorism!?”

“Oh, sorry.”

She let go of Kamijou's collar.

"Anyway, if you have no more business here, there's no reason for you to stick around. Um, do you have any club activities after this? Or do you work?"

"I just head on home."

"I see," was all the president said.

For better or for worse, she did not seem interested. She was wasting her afterschool time on her most troublesome duty, but she apparently had no prejudice against people who simply went home.

"Then let's head on home."

"Huh? What about the student council?"

"Um, there are busy days and there are days with nothing at all. The awful part is that we can't choose which days are which."

The Jumpy Bunny laughed weakly and removed her plastic gloves.

That ceremony seemed to say her work for the day was complete.

With nothing to do, Kamijou noticed something almost buried in the trash.

It was a rusted metal box about the size of two vaulting boxes side by side and it had a smokestack attached.

"There's still an incinerator here in this day and age?"

"The bottom was apparently attached to the concrete ground, so removing it would have cost a ton of money."

There was a metal door on the top of the box, but it was locked shut with thick chains and a padlock. So was the small window on the bottom for letting ashes out.

"If no one's using it, why bother locking it up?"

"Um..."

The president blushed and fidgeted for some reason. She also tapped her index fingers together in front of her (small, or rather, flat) chest.

Kamijou's expression vanished at this unexpected response.

Was there really any kind of "pink" element to what they were talking about?

“Are you saying this had to do with some bondage-obsessed person who goes around putting chains on everything or someone who loves sealing off enclosed spaces so no one can get in or out? Or maybe someone who wants to run a death game in the future?”

“Aren’t you letting your imagination run a little too wild!?”

“Then what is it?”

“Uuh...”

She started fidgeting again.

And then she answered him as if making a confession.

“Well... If the incinerator is left open, um, it seems students will sneak things into it at night and burn them. ...For example, um, an inappropriate magazine they worked up their courage to take to the register but were disappointed by and don’t know what to do with. Or a life-size doll or body pillow cover they got carried away and ordered online late at night.”

Kamijou felt a bolt of lightning run through his mind.

The struggling inside his scarf refused to stay quiet.

“(Don’t tell me that sounded like a good idea to you.)”

“O-of course not. I can’t believe you would think that.”

“Um, y-you can’t do that! It ends up causing a bunch of smoke, so you can’t do it secretly, and the sparks and smoke might even set off the school’s fire alarm! You’ll end up in tears as you’re charged with illegal entry and attempted arson. Even if you didn’t mean it, if people catch sight of a realistic doll’s burnt face or arm, it can cause a panic and get you charged forcible obstruction of business too! You’ll only be left with some baffling official records of the incident!!”

“I promise you I didn’t think it was a good idea!!”

It seemed to be more out of habit than to make sure it was locked, but the minimum president shook the padlock connected to the chains.

“No problem today either. Okay, let’s get home.”

“Sure.”

Kamijou and the Jumpy Bunny left the trash dump.

Another day of hard work was complete.

Part 5

After parting ways with the Jumpy Bunny at the school gate, Kamijou had a special mission.

“It’s finally time to visit the supermarket. Let’s do this! Let’s buy a full week’s worth of food!!”

“There’s something wrong with you when you have to announce that with so much conviction.”

The evening colors quickly became those of night.

Kamijou walked along the unfamiliar path home with Othinus on his shoulder. Their breath appeared white in the air.

“By the way, human. What do you think that starving nun is doing right now? You only had enough food in the dorm to make breakfast, right?”

“You didn’t know? Her perfect memory has memorized Maid-in-Training Maika’s route, so she can find food just by wandering around town if she has to.”

“And people don’t find that suspicious?”

“Speaking of Maika, what ever happened to Tsuchimikado? He wasn’t at school today and I was only vaguely told that the Kamisato Faction beat him up.”

They arrived at a certain street as they spoke.

“Wait, this is the shopping district’s main street. Isn’t everything here pretty expensive?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Everyone thinks so, so the stores end up with a lot of unsold stuff. But at the same time, it would hurt their brand name if they advertised the leftovers, so not many people learn about the sales on stuff that’s about to go bad and needs to be thrown out. This is the perfect time to go for a high-quality supermarket filled with imported food that’s usually ridiculously expensive!!”

“Hold on. It’s about to go bad? But didn’t you say this is for a whole week?”

“Othinus, I have a word of advice for a god like you.”

“?”

Othinus looked puzzled and Kamijou put on a gentle smile.

“Humans are pretty hard to kill.”

“You’re sorely mistaken if you think everyone’s as tough as you!!”

Each of Academy City’s districts was unique in its own way, but District 7 was fairly average or normal, for better or for worse. Kamijou and Othinus passed by restaurants such as family restaurants and hamburger shops, entertainment facilities like karaoke and arcades, and fashionable stores selling clothes or musical instruments. It all looked expensive, none of it looked like it would provide more than average satisfaction, and it was all chain stores, so it was kind of sad. The target demographic must have been students on the way back from school because boys and girls wearing a variety of uniforms were walking around.

And...

“Huh?”

“What is it, human?”

“I spotted some familiar faces. Um, it’s four-eyes, the Jumpy Bunny, and the less memorable student council members. Oh, and what’s-her-name from the middle school.”

“Are you sure you actually know these people!?”

If they saw Othinus on his shoulder (and thought she was a doll), they would start treating him in an unpleasantly warm way, so he quickly rewrapped his scarf and trapped Othinus in the wool hurricane.

“(You-...! This is super itchy, so don’t wrap it so tightly around me!)”

“We don’t have much choice. And shut up, god.”

After whispering back to her, he narrowed his eyes.

“Kamisato’s with them. I don’t want him to know you’re here.”

“...”

Even Othinus quieted down at that.

“(Can’t you just leave without saying anything?)”

“I’ve already stepped on the landmine. The only reason it hasn’t blown up yet is that I haven’t lifted my foot. One way to give the police probable cause to question you is to suddenly turn back for no apparent reason. In other words, I want to avoid standing out and causing unnecessary trouble. The best option is to follow the crowd on through.”

The student council and Kamisato were gathered around a crane game near the entrance of an arcade.

Kamijou's Imagine Breaker could not defeat Kamisato's World Rejecter.

That had been proven the previous night.

And there was unconfirmed information saying some other "thing" would burst out if Kamisato destroyed Kamijou's right arm. That scared Kamijou because he did not know the exact conditions for it.

The cheerful voices around him transformed into unintelligible static.

What if "that" burst out inside this crowd?

He was scared, but not because he could imagine it.

He was scared because he *could not* imagine it.

"Oh."

The boy in glasses caught sight of him.

The Jumpy Bunny and student council president named...what was it again? Anyway, she had her hands pressed against the crane game's glass, so the boy waved in her stead.

"It's Problem Student #2."

"You're pretty awful yourself. And does that mean Kamisato's #1 and I'm #2!?"

Kamijou shouted back without thinking, but Kamisato only shrugged and smiled thinly when he noticed.

"Well, I did arrive before you did."

"Can't argue with that."

At any rate, Kamijou approached the crane game.

Modern Middle School Girl Akikawa Mie was half hiding behind the palm-sized Jumpy Bunny. She poked out from behind that living hedge to maintain her defenses while facing Kamijou.

"U-um, uh... Thanks for before..."

"Before?"

"..."

“In fact, who even are you?”

“M-Mie-chan? Please don’t lean on me after drying out like that!”

They seemed to be killing time there, but since Kamijou did not see any prizes, he guessed they were doing nothing but losing. He had no idea how much money they had spent on it, but he had difficulty judging how much the ugly stuffed dolls in the glass case were worth. Kamijou Touma was on a quest for food, so that wasted money sent a shiver down his spine.

He guessed it was all due to the minimum student council president who had steam rising from the top of her head.

“U-uuuhhhh.... Almost there...almost there. Focus! You need to pour your willpower into this! Okay, let’s do it!!”

“You’re skipping past technique to focus on your mental state? And isn’t the crane game more about how loose the springs in the arm are? In fact, it’s about as cruel a business model as the settings at a pachinko-...”

He stopped when the glasses boy covered his mouth with a hand.

The glasses boy also placed an index finger in front of his own lips.

He was saying to stay quiet because this was amusing.

The brown-haired middle school girl was sticking her arms past the Jumpy Bunny, so Akikawa Mie was the one operating the buttons because the president had too much steam coming from her head. Kamijou started to suspect her student council work also came down to wishing, just like someone praying that the food they were cooking would taste good.

“(She’s always like this. Akikawa-san stops by to help afterschool and she honestly checks through about 80% of the paperwork, stamps them, and gives the go sign.)”

“So someone really has usurped the student council! Aogami, our delusions weren’t so crazy after all!!”

“(Yes, but we really just do odd jobs, so being usurped honestly just takes a load off our shoulders. But while Akikawa-san does everything perfectly, she doesn’t realize how much she’s actually helping out. It seems the president that represents the school needs to be rather unique...both physically and mentally.)”

One of them was treated like an idol-style one-day police chief with no experience but lots of charisma. The other was treated like the police bureaucrat that could reliably handle all the paperwork.

“I can’t tell if they’re loved or being mocked...”

“What!? Wh-wh-who are you saying is currently doing something that deserves being mocked!? Well excuse me for being the president yet just barely having average grades!!”

“Ehhh!? You’re the president, but you don’t get perfect scores!?”

“Eeeek! Eeeeeeeek!!”

“Um, but, Onee-chan, it’s just like you to not go for all 0s either.”

“Bfh! Wahhh!! You’re obviously just trying to make me feel better, Mie-chan! I’m surrounded!”

“Hm, so you’re not all that exciting in either direction. You’re just normal.”

Then someone clicked their tongue.

It was Kamisato Kakeru who loved being normal.

“That’s how the real world works. Being right in the middle is perfect. It makes you a proper human being.”

“Problem Student #1-kun, you’re not really helping my case!!”

“Sorry, but you can’t look for reality in someone like a student council president. They should only be an ideal that has nothing to do with my life.”

“And #2-kun is crushing my basic human rights to prioritize his own dreams!?”

Kamijou ignored her complaints and looked over to the crane game.

“What’s even in this thing? It looks like a bunch of round and heavy stuffed dolls. Wow are they ever ugly.”

The glasses boy answered.

“They’re all reproductions of old mascots.”

“What?”

“That car with a human face is a leftover from a motor show, that round one is the mascot for a lunar development forum half a year ago, and that twisted giraffe-like one is Mast-kun, official mascot two world cups ago.”

“Wait, you mean none of these things are in season!? I can already see the warehouses filling up!!”

Whatever their original price was, their current value had to be lower than 0 and they would almost have to pay someone to take them away. So why were they making an attack on this lineup that seemed to be rebelling against capitalism?”

The Jumpy Bunny, who was neither a genius nor a failure, bit her lip.

“I promised Mie-chan.”

“?”

Kamijou tilted his head, so the modern middle school girl smiled bitterly.

“Half a year ago, we promised to go to that lunar development forum together. We weren’t interested in the academics of it, though. Um, we were really just excited because a major actor was there to promote a movie set on a space station. But, well, you know how people can get too excited the night before and end up with a fever?”

The glasses boy gave some supplementary information.

“Our tutoring system lets a high school student provide one-on-one lessons for a middle school student to help them advance to the high school. That’s where the connection between the president and Akikawa-san came from.”

“Hm. So the president wants to get that stuffed doll for the girl who got a fever back then?”

“N-no... I was the one that got the fever...”

“You little brat!!”

Kamijou’s lack of mercy brought the president about 80% of the way to tears.

“M-Mie-chan could’ve gone on her own, but she insisted on looking after me since I had a fever. So she wasted her chance...”

“I didn’t really mind, though,” said Akikawa while nearly embracing the girl from behind.

However...

“Sorry to interrupt your emotional scene, but...hey, four-eyes. You said the high school helps the middle school with a tutoring system, right?”

“Since the two schools are combined, it’s really just a system to keep the middle school students from being taken away by other high schools. ...And the president isn’t much help as a tutor, so she really only ends up having Akikawa-san look after her. She even has

a lunch made for her every day, so the idiot can't even feed herself without help from a middle schooler."

"Eeek!!" shrieked the Jumpy Bunny, but Kamijou already had a hand on his head.

That minimum president was gathering popularity by creating an odd desire to protect her. He could only assume she won the student council election with nothing but pity votes.

That said...

"So you just really want to get that lunar development forum mascot?"

"U-um, getting that now isn't really going to change anything, but since I saw it here, I would feel kind of guilty if I just ignored it."

"(If it isn't valuable or anything, couldn't she get one really cheap at a used goods store?)"

That fundamental question was silenced by a chop to the neck by the glasses boy.

He seemed to be prioritizing his enjoyment of this.

The palm-sized president breathed from her nose.

"Okay, here goes! Let's do this! Mie-chan, you help me. We can see the one direction from here, so Problem Students #1 and #2, you two watch the case from the sides! We need to get this exactly right!!"

"No matter how many people you have watching from the same side, they'll still see the same thing."

Kamijou's objection was rejected.

He had no choice but to join Kamisato to view the crane game case from the side as instructed by the president who had Akikawa's hands on the controls.

"(Hey, four-eyes, the president isn't actually doing anything!)"

"(This is really the state of the student council in a nutshell. But it's amusing, so just roll with it.)"

Othinus was still inside Kamijou's scarf, which put her less than ten centimeters from Kamisato. That dire situation seemed to double Kamijou's heartrate, but then his shoulder bumped lightly into Kamisato's.

“Ow...”

“?”

“Unfortunately, my body doesn’t regrow and heal itself as conveniently as your right arm. I have a ton of bandages under my clothes right now. And on top of the injuries you gave me, I had to fight *some stray dog*.”

“So you’re asking me to apologize? You chopped off my arm, remember?”

“Heh.”

For some reason, that made Kamisato laugh.

“I’m relieved, harem boy. If you were such an indiscriminate philanthropist that you would even whisper sweet things to me, I would have given up on trying to speak with you. Y’know something like ‘I didn’t really want to fight you, you know? (smile)’ ”

“Sometimes, it’s hard to tell what the target of your hatred even is.”

“Also.” Kamisato ignored his comment. “If this thing can erase you, then you must have conflicting desires. Y’know, like complaining that you want to return home from the alternate world you’ve found yourself in but also enjoying the harem you’re building up.”

“Please don’t use alternate worlds in your examples! Not everyone’s going to understand that!!”

“Really? As you can see, I’m the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere, so a trip overseas actually feels more out of reach to me. Manga and video games feel a lot closer to home than desperately mastering a foreign language and heading to the airport with a passport and plane ticket in hand.”

“To be honest, I thought you didn’t have any hobbies.”

“Can you really call that a hobby? I like them, but I don’t know all *that* much about them. That’s always how it is with me. I might say my hobby is watching movies, but I can’t list off a bunch of French films no one’s ever heard of. I listen to music, but I’ve never been to a concert. It really is all things like that.”

“You really are stupid. You don’t have to earn a gold medal in something before you can call it a hobby.”

“What’s the point of something you aren’t willing to spend that much time on?”

The boys held their discussion while watching the toy-like crane.

Kamijou wondered if the root of Kamisato Kakeru's "distortion" came from how clean he liked everything. It was not that strange a desire and Kamijou felt there were a few similar people even in his own class.

"I have nothing and I don't want anything I can call myself best in the world at. But I do wish I had some major achievement that was noticeable even from an objective standpoint. In that way, I think Akikawa Mie-san is truly amazing. As a middle schooler, she's taken control of the high school student council just by helping out a little. When she takes it that far, you have to call it a form of individuality. Just bringing it up in conversation can fill in the gaps. It destroys the awkward elevator silence. I have nothing like that. No matter how far I follow the things I like, it's all so light."

He refused to rely on cheap tricks even if he knew he could not reach #1, but he also could not forgive himself for not reaching #1 when playing fair. Kamijou had no idea where or who this "#1" was, but Kamisato had built up that monster in his head and was burning with a desire to challenge it.

He wanted to reach #1 fair and square, so being pushed up in the ranks by a stroke of good luck would not make him happy. It only felt awkward.

That was why he sought a proper reason and justification for any good fortune he ran across.

And if he could not find that, he would reject it as not his to take.

He knew nothing was free, so he assumed that what he was given had been stolen somewhere along the line.

In his case, he had concentrated that into his relationships.

He would not allow others to spoil him.

He would say it was unnatural and wrong.

"Living like that has got to be exhausting."

"Sorry, but I can't read minds."

Conflicting desires.

Kamisato Kakeru made that sound like a form of evil, but Kamijou was not so sure. You might wish you had gone for ramen while eating katsudon, but not many people would immediately push the katsudon aside and start making ramen. It might be the next day or the day after that, but they would eat ramen eventually. But for the time being, they would focus on the katsudon in front of them. ...What was wrong with that?

Kamisato would not allow that second desire. He would only allow himself to continue down the direct path to the dream in his mind. He would not allow himself the mental weakness that prepared a backup in case it failed. He would not allow himself to hold the possibility of failure in a corner of his mind. He would never allow himself to utter the phrase "realistic compromise".

That seemed like another sign of Kamisato's need for everything to be clean.

He claimed to be the kind of normal high school boy found anywhere and he was exactly right.

He was not driven by an incomprehensible end-times philosophy based on a strange myth or legend. His thoughts were normal ones that a few people in any given class would have.

However, he had World Rejecter, the unique right hand which had defeated Magic Gods by the dozen and even destroyed Kamijou's Imagine Breaker in a direct clash.

That was what had made the result look so strange, just like giving a small child the launch codes for a nuclear missile.

"Ideal Sender, hm?"[1]

"What about it?"

"That really is perfect for you," spat out Kamijou.

His reflection in the crane game's glass contained a smile that was anything but friendly.

"If someone is thinking of a realistic compromise, you send them to the far reaches of the ideal. You hide it behind some confusing stuff about a new world, but that's really what you're doing. Not everyone that vanishes wanted an ideal world. The one who wants the ideal more than anyone else is you, the one wielding that right hand. Whether it's you or someone else, you just can't allow someone to let go of the ideal as reality crushes them. *So you want to give them a push forward with that right hand of yours.*"

In that way, he was a hero.

Of course people would gather around him.

Especially those with extreme individuality who already had someone they wanted to be or a direction they wanted to head in.

Everyone wanted someone to accept their dream and give them a push in that direction.

[1] The kanji for World Rejecter

But...

“Nephthys said there was probably a reason World Rejecter ended up in your right hand, just like there was a reason Imagine Breaker ended up in my right hand. ...It’s true that right hand wouldn’t suit me. It’s really convenient, but it wouldn’t fit me. The word ‘save’ might be too presumptuous, but my idea of ‘saving’ people and your idea of ‘saving’ people are two different things.”

Someone might want to correct the world, bring back someone who died, become the very best, or never again see a tragedy like the one they had seen. Their ideal was not wrong, but Kamijou had seen several magicians and espers who had grown so focused on that one thing that they spread quite a bit of damage which completely defeated their original purpose. When Kamijou fought, he shattered that solidified “ideal” and tried to look at it from a different angle.

He destroyed illusions.

No matter how many words one used, that was the essence of Kamijou Touma.

What would Kamisato Kakeru have done if he had been there then?

He would have given them a push forward.

He would not have hesitated to give them that push toward the cliff waiting beyond their ideal.

“Do you really understand?”

Kamisato’s tone underwent a change.

Even if he had started as a normal high school boy, this was the voice of someone who did not know where he was ultimately headed.

“It was a perfectly normal school in a perfectly normal city. Ellen, Claire, Elza, and all the rest lived as they wished, no one stood at the center, and they paved their separate ways toward their own dreams. But then along came this right hand. It was just like iron sand gathering around a magnet. They all went crazy, they broke, and they were twisted. They became ‘special’ and can only see anything in that one direction. There’s no freedom in such an obvious form of ‘special’. It’s as shallow as an alternate world RPG with four battle command options and a linear story. More times than I’d like, I’ve seen that ‘special’ thing taken from them, leaving them with nothing at all. Do you really think you can see what lies at the bottom of my heart?”

A wrong decision might have led to a wrong conclusion. Kamijou was not a Magic God that could create a world from scratch and discussing the “what ifs” of history was silly, but he might have been able to judge what would have best if he compared reality to those “what ifs”.

Still, he had a feeling that giving a push to those backs would not lead to smiles.

Not even for the one whose ideal had been made a reality thanks to that thorough support.

“It’s okay to waver.”

So Kamijou no longer hesitated.

There was nothing to be afraid of.

“You can have a hundred or even a thousand conflicting desires, swap them out whenever it’s convenient, and say the exact opposite of what you said five seconds ago. All of that’s okay as long as everyone’s smiling in the end. If you can reach that conclusion, then throwing out your principles and morals is perfectly fine. I’d be much happier as that kind of clown than as some great hero who adheres to his principles all alone and can’t smile with anyone.”

Kamisato started to say something, but the words never came.

The palm-sized student council president known as the Jumpy Bunny raised her voice instead.

“Here we go, here we go, here we go!! It’s finally here! This is the best match and the best position!”

“Yes, yes. Now quit jumping around, Onee-chan.”

“It’s perfect side-to-side, so now we just have to move it back!! We’re counting on you, so watch carefully!!”

The crane moved at a standard speed within the giant glass case. Kamijou and Kamisato ended their conversation and watched the arm’s movement.

“Keep going. Keep going. Keep going some more!”

“There are two of those round things, one on the front pile and one in the back valley. Which one are we after? Well, I guess the one on the pile would be easier.”

“What are you talking about? The one in the back has the top loop of string sticking out nicely. The round body is too big, so we can’t get it without the arm grabbing that loop.”

“The pile.”

“The valley!”

“Eh? Eh? Who am I supposed to listen to!?”

“You idiot!! You’re going to pass them both by!!”

“You idiot!! You’re going to pass them both by!!”

The Jumpy Bunny hopped up with a loud cry and she bumped into Akikawa Mie who was reaching her hands in from behind. Her hands left the large buttons and the crane took its final position at not quite the pile and not quite the valley.

The light electronic jingle sounded almost melancholy. Kamijou and Kamisato felt like they were watching a car driving off a cliff as the arm slowly lowered toward another prize altogether.

The glasses boy gave his assessment with a cheerful smile.

“Oh, that’s Soapy Sukebe-Isu-chan, mascot of Japan’s Proud Sex Industry Exhibition. I think the most recent one was at the end of October.”

“What was Japan doing while some of us were facing World War III!?”

The Jumpy Bunny looked confused and Akikawa Mie blushed bright red. Now, which of those reactions was more worthy of comment?

“That’s strange. Weren’t we in a serious bind since the superpower of Russia had declared war on us? ...And the event itself is just awful! Was this really a character people wanted walking around there!?”

“Well, I suppose this isn’t something you can give a middle school girl to apologize for getting a fever. ...Her disappointment would quickly change to worry.”

The crane arm grabbed the stuffed doll as if stabbing it in the eye. And for some reason, the arm seemed to have excessive power this time. Some other stuffed doll was caught on the first one, but the crane forcibly pulled them both up.

The tearful president pressed both hands against the glass.

“Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhh...”

“Oh, that one caught on it that looks like a dried-up banana is Sticky Higozuiki-chan.”

“Why do you know so much about this, four-eyes?”

That sexual harassment doll seemed to have formed the foundation below the other prizes, so pulling it out seemed to have caused the ground to shift. A nearby pile wobbled and finally collapsed.

And that included the round target at the top.

A ton of stuffed dolls poured toward the hole like a landslide and Kamisato Kakeru gave a horribly bitter smile.

“I just saw a miracle occur, so why don’t I feel even remotely jealous?”

“Maybe because these are all trash if you don’t have any emotional attachment?”

Besides, with Kamijou Touma’s misfortune, he would never encounter a miracle that included getting a bunch of stuffed dolls that anyone would actually want. If a miracle had occurred, there had to be some reason why it was a problem.

The Jumpy Bunny with long black hair and large ribbon picked up the round stuffed doll and held it toward heaven with a beaming smile.

“Yes!! We got Lunar Zit-kun!!”

“Its name is an insult!?”

“Here you go, Mie-chan! Now I’ve preserved my dignity as an upperclassman. Heh heh!!”

“Ah...ah ha ha. Thanks... (What am I supposed to do with this?)”

The modern middle school girl seemed to be practicing how to use her facial muscles.

Kamisato pointed something out with flat emotions that strayed from the others’ excitement.

“So what do we do about the other prizes? It doesn’t look like the president plans to take them with her.”

Everyone but the president (who looked like she was seeing heaven) exchanged a glance in the real world.

And that included Akikawa Mie who had already had one forced onto her.

They glanced over at the malicious prizes still sitting in the prize slot by the dozen.

The negative aura was quite impressive.

None of them had that kind of esper power, but a black and purple haze seemed to appear.

If they were suspected of a crime and their home had to be searched, this bizarre collection would be shown on a talk show as an example of a modern disease. And after that, proving their innocence would be difficult indeed. Who could say how often those things would be brought up in the dramatic trial.

The glasses boy cleared his throat.

“To make this fair, let’s play rock-paper-...”

“Please no!! I already know I’ll lose and end up with every last one of them! You understand, don’t you? That wouldn’t be fair at all. Kamisato, you can vouch for me, can’t you!? You know how karma treats you when you have a special right hand like this! You have World Rejecter, so you don’t want this to come down to a game of chance, do you!?”

“Well.” Kamisato gave a heavy sigh while clenching and unclenching his hand. “The only thing I can think of is inexplicably having every girl around me obsessing over me. I’ll agree it’s a frightening side effect.”

“Okay, that’s it, Mr. Popular. Fists! We’re settling this with our fists!!”

Part 6

It was the middle of the night.

Kamijou Touma was trudging back to his dorm with an armful of stuffed trash.

But at the same time, Misaka Mikoto, ace of prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School, was walking slowly along a river a short distance from District 7’s shopping district.

She had no real destination in mind.

Tokiwadai was strict about its dorm rules, so being out at night was risking a lot for little in return.

She could have easily gotten lost in thought inside her dorm room, but she had still decided to sneak out past the strict guard there and walk through the city at night. She may have wanted a different environment or to place herself in an abnormal and irrational position.

Why went without saying.

“*He’s so...*”

Even now, Academy City was recovering as a city and people would be filling the shopping district. But the scars had not been entirely erased. “Under construction” signs and yellow tape blocked some areas off and a lot of places had yet to replace their broken windows.

Misaka Mikoto knew what had caused this.

The Magic God known as the High Priest.

And the boy who had challenged that monster head-on.

"He's so far away!!!!!"

"Sigh..."

A white breath entered the biting night air.

Simply put, she had been stewing. She was afraid that boy would leave her behind and she wanted to pursue him if she could. But how could she? She was one of Academy City's seven Level 5s. She was the #3 Railgun. That undoubtedly made her a rare person, but that also meant that she had nowhere else to go and that she could not turn back.

That immense and stable power was the worst possible restraint.

She had nothing that especially stuck out.

(So what am I supposed to do now?)

Even if she mastered Academy City's Curriculum, she doubted the #3 Railgun could defeat the #1 Accelerator. That had been proven by cold calculations, so there was no doubting it.

Then should she give up on anything related to her esper power? Was there something else she could reach for? But even if she started on something new, she could not see herself climbing the invisible staircase to the next stage.

Yes, there was a next stage.

The High Priest and that boy stood on it, so she knew it was there.

But she could not picture herself on it.

She was only a step away from being the strongest.

She was the #3.

As someone who had approached the final stage of comparative power, she understood.

It was just like the final stage of a chess or shogi game. Unlike when the pieces were first lined up, the spaces she could move to were limited. There was no freedom and only a few cramped routes remained.

And she doubted any of those would take her to that stage.

Unpleasant ideas spiraled through her mind.

She felt like a bowling ball was weighing on her stomach.

(Could it be...?)

In other words...

(*Did I develop in the wrong direction...?*)

She gulped.

The cold wind dropped further in temperature and stole away her body heat.

The lost time would not come back. Once the game piece had been sent out, it could not be brought back. She was dizzied by the shocking fact that it was her partial success that had told her this optimum path did not lead to the answer. Where had she taken the wrong fork in the road? Would she have to move further and further back and finally restart her life from the very beginning if she wanted to reach this goal? That vision filled her mind.

And...

She did not know.

Even if she knew her current path did not lead to the goal, she did not know what it was she had to redo and what it was she had to obtain if she was to stand on the same stage as that boy. She could not tell. She knew she had done something wrong, but she could not reflect on or regret her mistake. And all the while, time moved on. She knew her train was not travelling to her destination, but she did not know where to switch to another train. She felt impatience filling her chest.

And to make matters worse...

(He...)

Misaka Mikoto clenched her teeth.

(He isn't necessarily going to stay on that same stage forever.)

Yes.

Her goal was not arriving at that stage. It was the person there. Returning to the train metaphor, they had no set meeting point and he was constantly on the move. She knew the name of the last station he had been seen at, but she did not know what line led to that

station. Plus, he was wandering through that giant and complex station and could board some other train at any time.

He would move further and further away if she did nothing.

He would freely board whatever other train he wanted and continue his journey to some utterly unknown place.

(Calm down...)

After following the river for a while, Mikoto walked toward a large bridge crossing it.

She looked over the railing at the dark water and stared at the cold moon floating in it.

(At the very least, there is a line that leads there. He isn't in Ryugu-jo or Kaguya-hime's palace. He climbed to that stage himself, so there has to be a line leading there. The answer has to be right in front of my eyes. But how do I see it? How can I change my viewpoint?)

It was probably something like Columbus' egg.

It only looked complex to her because she did not know how to view the trick art.

The world was always there before her eyes.

No one had maliciously locked it up with a key.

She heard the city at night, felt the biting chill of the wind, and saw the moon floating in the water's surface.

She had left her usual room and its usual warmth because she had hoped this new stimulus would pry open that door. She had hoped it would be just like getting stuck on a crossword puzzle and having the answer come to her as she took a light jog.

But it had not.

This stimulus was insufficient.

It was not enough to change the colors of the trick art that was the world.

(It isn't that we live in different worlds.)

She thought to herself as she rested her elbow on the railing and her cheek in her hand.

She felt like a profiler analyzing a target's mental state from their actions and statistical data.

(He's looking at Academy City and District 7 just like me...but what colors does he see this city in?)

Suddenly, a new stimulus cut off her vainly circling thoughts.

It was a footstep that felt like the ripples of a pebble disturbing the moon in the water's surface.

She turned toward that solid sound and then she saw it.

"Hi."

She did not recognize the barefoot girl.

Her silver hair glittered at certain angles like a CD and it was rolled up on either side of her head like disks or demon horns. She had a small and slender body. Most noticeable of all, she wore translucent raincoats directly over her bare skin, creating a bizarre outfit that only seemed practical if she was worried about getting a victim's blood on her in a dark bathroom. She held a heavy sports bag by a shoulder strap, but Mikoto seriously doubted it contained baseball bats or lacrosse sticks. Even if it did contain sports equipment, Mikoto doubted it would be used in the intended fashion.

Despite the cold, the girl seemed to be eating a vanilla popsicle.

No. Mikoto had no way of knowing, but that was actually a bleached leather paddle meant for striking people. That tool of torture was easier to use than a whip which required snapping, and it could apply deep and definite damage.

"Lick, lick. Hmm, leather doesn't taste very good. Or maybe the problem's the oil rubbed onto it for maintenance."

Sounding displeased, the double raincoat girl removed the paddle from her mouth. She then easily tore it in two like a rejected contract.

Mikoto did not know the details, but whatever that had been, she knew it was not normal to tear apart that thick a piece of leather with one's bare hands. It had to be even harder than tearing the phonebook in two.

The danger of the city's night had just risen.

Mikoto felt her pulse in both her heart and the blood vessels of her neck as a prickling pain covered all of her skin. She had no idea who this was, but she was already receiving danger signals.

This girl gave off the image of a ferocious beast.

She approached one step at a time and would charge at Mikoto if provoked.

Mikoto was an ace known as the #3 Railgun of Academy City's seven Level 5s.

But this sense of danger overturned even that assumption.

"Misaka Mikoto."

The girl with a waterproof hood over her head placed the words on her tongue as if reading them off a document.

This "thing" knew her name.

That fact alone seemed to scorch Mikoto's nerves.

"Misaka Mikoto. Yes, this has gotta work well. Hamazura Shiage didn't really seem like a good match. While he's worked alongside Kamijou Touma, he's essentially part of a different circle. I tried it since I'd run across someone connected to Kamijou Touma, but he wasn't quite what I was looking for. It would be hard to say attacking him would do any damage to the Kamijou Faction. ...But most of all, his response was pretty amusing."

The raincoat girl's shoulders shook with laughter.

The shaking produced a metallic rattling from the sports bag.

"But I won't have that problem with you, Misaka Mikoto. You've gotta be about as deep in the Kamijou Faction as it gets. If I'm gonna crush someone, it would be you, don'tcha think? Relationships aren't neatly divided out like a honeycomb. They're like a twisted house of cards. Pull out a single card, and it'll all start to collapse."

"Who...are you?"

The vague pressure and tension had a definite directionality to it.

But not because this girl knew her personal information or was announcing intent to harm her.

This ferocious beast was acting on her knowledge of the name Kamijou Touma.

"Now. What should I call myself?"

A white breath escaped the raincoat girl's lovely lips as she honestly pondered that question.

"Should I simply go with Salome? Or should I say I'm the Mass Murderer that the mass media refuses to cover? No, I think I know what would be most effective. After all, I'm picking a fight with the Kamijou Faction right now."

"...?"

Mikoto looked confused as those lovely lips split apart.

They bent maddeningly and maliciously.

The raincoat girl grabbed the cheap toy pocket watch hanging from her neck by a thick thread and she lightly kissed it.

"Yes. You can call me Kamisato Kakeru's little sister. Oh, but we're not blood-related."

All sound seemed to vanish.

All color seemed to burst.

As soon as Mikoto realized Salome was running straight toward her like a bullet, the danger signal grew explosively in her mind. She released bluish-white sparks from her bangs almost on reflex. The way the approaching raincoat girl stuck out her small tongue and licked her lips stabbed into Mikoto's mind to an odd extent.

An explosive sound followed.

It felt like it lasted just an instant. It also felt like a simple flash of light. A one billion volt Lightning Spear had burst from her bangs, but it did not hit Salome. It only scorched the air and there was no longer anyone there.

Mikoto emitted electromagnetic waves from her body and used them like radar, so she was able to follow the other girl's movement.

However, she had trouble believing the answer that gave her.

Salome had not run past her.

Nor had she jumped over her.

The only word she could think to describe it was "dancing". Salome was dancing, just like the legend from which she took her extremely ominous name. And that gave a hint as to what desire was contained within the action.

She would seduce the king and decapitate a holy man.

It was truly a dance of death.

(What...is that? Can human joints really move like that!?)

"Too slow."

The voice was distorted.

She moved so quickly a burnt smell from the torn pavement reached Mikoto after the fact.

The sound had come from...behind her!?

"...!!"

Mikoto did not turn around.

It was lucky her opponent had a toy pocket watch hanging from her neck. That strengthened Mikoto's radar sense. She considered magnetically pulling it straight up to hang the girl, but...

Don't touch me, stranger. Do you want me to vivisect you?

"..."

That thought reached her via pressure rather than via a voice.

A chill seemed to flash freeze her entire spine.

She was honestly glad she was not facing her opponent at the moment.

Before her body tensed up, she simply manipulated magnetism. She gathered iron sand from her surroundings and vibrated it at high speed to create an Iron Sand Sword that could instantly slice through a wind turbine. She then launched it directly behind her.

While it was essentially a sword, the blade's length and shape could change like a whip.

Its incredible cutting power could slice through anything in a single blow. She saw no way this cruel attack could be successfully blocked or avoided if her opponent was seeing it for the first time.

And yet, a dry bursting sound rang out as Misaka Mikoto's Iron Sand Sword was mercilessly destroyed.

It vanished.

The reliable sensation of that weapon...no, that lifeline had vanished.

"Wha-...?"

The #3's thoughts were briefly swallowed up by a void.

This was different from the #1's reflection. The Iron Sand Sword had shattered. It was destroyed. It was negated.

She only knew one person who could do this.

Or so she had thought.

"Ah?"

There were no more strategies or tactics. Mikoto's mind remained blank as she turned around to find an answer to her question. She found Salome's evilly smiling eyes at extreme close range.

Yes.

The raincoat-wearing mass murderer was smiling.

The bottom of her double raincoat spread out like a dancer's veil.

"External Offering."

She spoke the words as if rolling a piece of candy around in her mouth.

A moment later, violent attacks crossed paths between them.

One was a Lightning Spear fired from Misaka Mikoto's bangs.

The other was Salome's casually swung right hand. It swung diagonally upwards with the fingers gently bent. It should have not quite reached Mikoto's body, but the chilly night air split apart, the asphalt was torn into at her feet, and the railing was sliced in two with a burst of orange sparks. Mikoto had quickly leaned her upper body backwards, but all of the buttons burst from her coat and a few strands of her bangs were cut away.

Tension scorched her nerves.

But not because this was a mysterious invisible attack. She had recognized it.

She knew the answer.

"An Iron Sand...Sword!?"

"Correct."

Mikoto manipulated magnetism as she moved back to put some distance between them. A bicycle floated up from the cold river, a wind turbine was pulled out at the base, and a second Iron Sand Sword gathered around her right hand.

She launched them all at once.

But...

“External Offering.”

As soon as she detected the invisible attack that produced familiar results, the rusty bicycle was annihilated in midair.

“External Offering.”

Next it was the supporting column of the wind turbine.

“External Offering.”

Finally, the pure Iron Sand Sword was destroyed again.

Each time Salome swung her arm and the slash with a mysterious reach rushed out, the attack was different. Its weight changed, is sharpness increased, and it evolved into an even more violent storm.

“Your attack *isn’t* just destruction or negation.”

Mikoto doubted this was simply an esper power.

But then what was it?

“Do you absorb it and then gain its traits and destructive power!?”

“Is it really that shocking?”

Salome clenched and unclenched her right hand while tilting her head.

“*I’m using a Celtic system, but you can find things like this all over the world. By destroying a specific weapon, jewel, or animal’s flesh and abandoning it at a designated place, it acts as a sacrifice and prayer for victory. The idea of a living sacrifice stands out a lot and can seem to exist in a vacuum, but that’s only the extreme version after it all escalated. The original and proper form of a sacrifice is to use an object, a dance, or some other kind of offering that doesn’t require taking a life.*”

“...Eh...?”

Her mind gave up on parsing that as language.

No, she could not let herself be trapped by her own thoughts.

She could not stop here. She had to keep going.

This was scorching her mind, but it had to be some kind of starting point.

This would help her change the angle at which she viewed the trick art that was the world.

“So I can absorb anything I can destroy with my own hands.”

An explosion stabbed across the bridge.

The raincoat girl with the tan lines of a school swimsuit on her bare skin took only a half step to the side.

She smiled.

“But if it’s too powerful for me to destroy or it doesn’t function as a weapon, then I can’t absorb it as a means of attack.”

A high-pitched sound filled the air.

Misaka Mikoto had flicked an arcade coin up with her thumb.

Salome’s evil expression remained intact.

It was not that she did not know what was coming. She knew and she was waiting for it.

At three times the speed of sound, an orange beam roasted the air as it shot forward.

The air was whipped up.

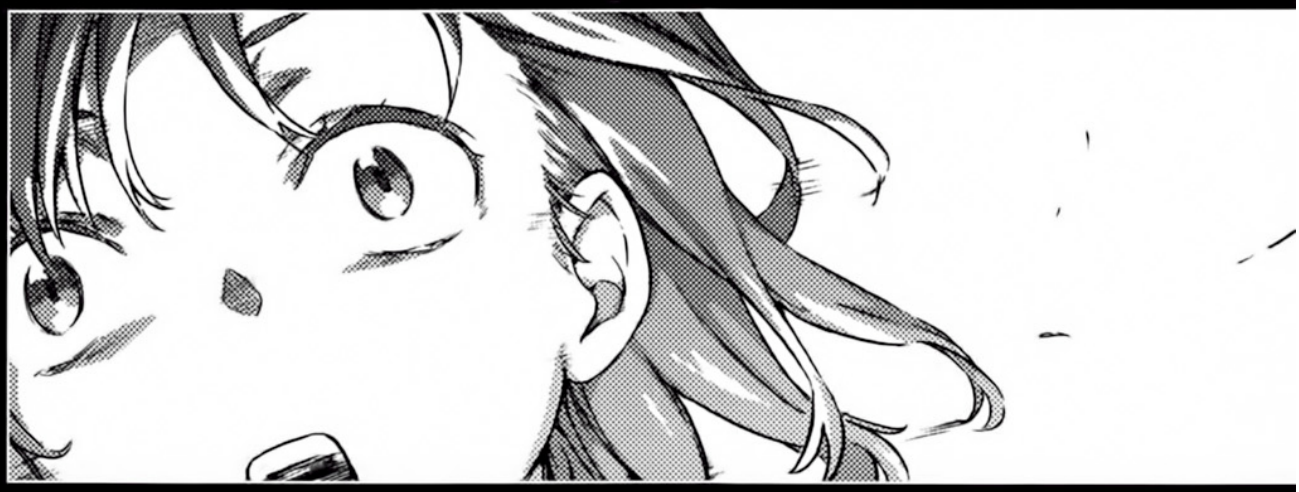
A violent shockwave surrounded them.

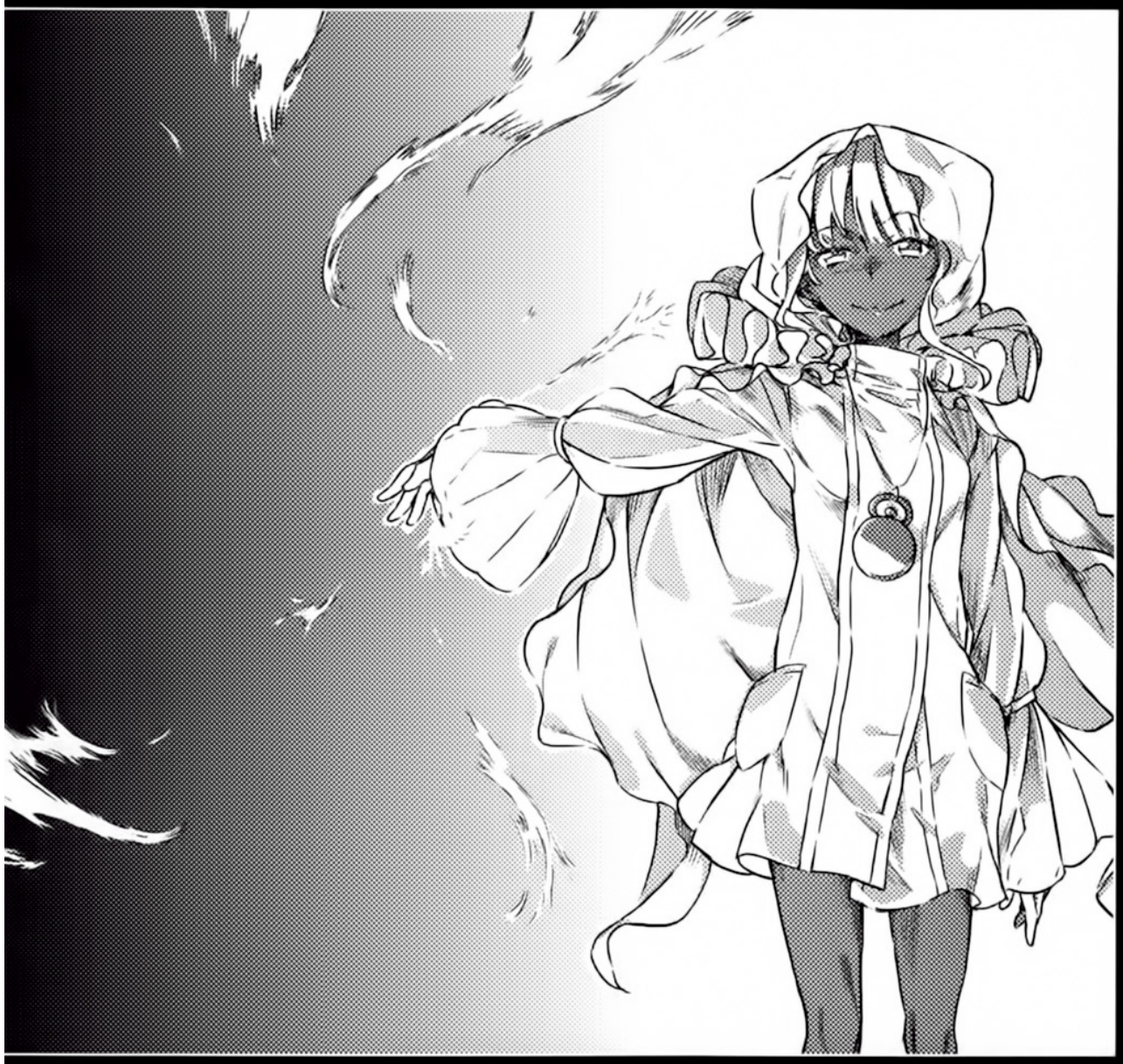
The asphalt was ripped from the road.

“Hee hee.”

She laughed.

Unscathed, Mass Murderer Salome laughed with her lightly clenched right hand swept out horizontally.





It had severed the orange trail.

Misaka Mikoto's signature Railgun was nowhere to be seen.

"Something I can't destroy barehanded doesn't normally apply for my External Offering, but now that I've built up this much of a 'chain', pretty much anything goes, don'tcha think?"

"..."

"And now I've consumed the #3's Railgun and offered it up. Its destructive power is now mine. Now. A question. Iron Sand Sword, bicycle, telephone pole, rubble, and a Railgun to finish it off. Now that it's snowballed up so much, just how flashy an attack will this be? The answer is coming up after these messages."

"...Heh."

"*Why the hell are you laughing?*"

"Well..."

What look did she have on her face right now?

This was even more incredible than *that boy*. But at the very least, she did not feel despair. Her signature Railgun had not reached her opponent. She should have been panicking, but the shock was surprisingly small. The Magic God known as the High Priest had done the same thing, but that was not enough to explain the lack of shock.

Then what was it?

Mikoto asked herself that, but she did not want to find the answer.

She was pretty sure she would hate herself if she did.

"So it really is out there. I was having trouble finding the stimulus I needed to gain a different view of the trick art known as the world, but here it is just waltzing up to me."

Were her eyes filled with the shadows of a hopelessly dark new moon?

Or were her eyes filled with the light of a hopelessly bright full moon?

She did not want to know.

She did not want to know.

She did not want to know.

“I hate dealing with stuff like this. You’ve gotta be completely insane.”

“More. Give me more. This has to be taking me in the right direction. *I can’t understand you at all as I am, so if I can overcome you, I can find the next stage I’m looking for*!!”

“But I guess I was right to start this here. I’m crazy enough that people call me a mass murderer behind my back, but you’re gonna take it even further than me if you keep going in this direction.”

Mikoto ignored her.

She greedily licked her lips and pulled out another arcade coin. Taking a direct hit would mean instant death and she could even absorb and accumulate the full power of Academy City’s #3, so Mikoto was no match for Mass Murderer Salome. After all, Mikoto could only use “up to” her full power whereas Salome could add more on top of that. The difference was simply insurmountable.

It was kill or be killed.

Those two extremes were the only options and odds were good Mikoto would be the one to die.

But she would do it.

No matter how biased toward her personal viewpoint it was, Mikoto had a reason to defeat Salome.

She would defeat her and ask her how to properly view the trick art that was the world.

She would ask her for the foothold she needed to climb onto the same stage as that boy.

She would make those things hers!!

“Daaaaaahhh!! Stop that, stop that. Why would you create a super opponent that can keep up with your mass murderer side!? Are you seriously trying to bring about the end of the world here!?”

Just before she could, someone interfered.

Flying was not quite the right word. The glasses girl seemed to drop down from the night sky, but she had probably launched herself up by wrapping ivy around the bridge’s railing from below.

Her black hair was tied back in twintails and she wore a white dress that looked chilly in midwinter. She would have looked plain, but the giant tropical flowers on either side of her head changed that impression entirely.

She stood next to Misaka Mikoto.

Mikoto could tell she was an esper, even if not one made in Academy City. She would not provide the foothold Mikoto needed to solve the trick art she wanted to process and understand.

“And you stop giving Salome all that unnecessary fuel! Salome is a mass murderer who gains power indefinitely as long as her chain continues. Under the right conditions, she seriously could walk right in and singlehandedly destroy the White House. Priority one when trying to defeat her is to break her chain. It doesn’t take that much thought to figure that out, does it!?”

The raincoat girl scratched her head through her waterproof hood and shook the rattling sports bag.

“Hmm. Claire, you’re being a little hard on her, don’tcha think? She doesn’t know that my External Offering reverts to neutral if I don’t give it another weapon within three minutes.”

“Shut up, Mass Murderer.”

Mikoto’s temperature finally dropped below the boiling point.

At the same time, she realized something. If those two were telling the truth, then that sports bag had to contain “emergency rations”. Salome could destroy one of its contents if the chain was about to break in order to absorb the new weapon and keep things going for another three minutes.

Claire was exactly right.

When someone set a snowball rolling, the fear began once it reached a certain size. And then even the person who had started it would be crushed if it rolled over them. Plus, Academy City had crammed research institutions and next generation law enforcement weapons into its limited space, so it was just about the worst environment to challenge this girl.

“Kamisato-san has his own plans. Observing his school life should be enough to tell you he doesn’t need any direct killing done right now.”

“Oh? I was wondering what this was about, but you’re putting my brother first, are you? Still, would that coward really agree to harming his little sister?”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m willing to eliminate Kamisato-san’s relatives as long as it’s for his sake in the end.”

The girl named Claire clapped her hands together in front of her chest.

A bewitching light glowed through her glasses and she spoke in a low voice.

“Don’t get carried away, little girl. You’re just a remora that gains her status by clinging to his brand, so don’t think the protection of being his sister will protect you forever. If you think you can trick me into thinking you alone are special, you’re dead wrong.”

“Oh, dear. Why is everyone around my brother like this? Well, the only difference is that one of us knows we’re crazy and the other doesn’t, so arguing over who’s superior is just plain silly.”

The raincoat girl sighed.

“Also, do you honestly think I’ll let you stall for three minutes? Don’t underestimate me, you little weed. You’re at the bottom of the food chain. Blades and weapons are symbols of civilization, so get lost unless you want to get reaped by human hands.”

“...”

“...”

The silence lasted a few seconds.

After a dull sound, the two of them vanished from the bridge.

(Into...the river!?)

Mikoto immediately looked to the side, but she could only see a slight disturbance in the moon floating on the dark water’s surface. Not even an electromagnetic scan told her what those two were doing, but it seemed they were fighting on top of the water, not in it.

The reading grew more distant.

Misaka Mikoto was dumbfounded for a bit, but then a gust of chilly wind struck her heated body.

That was when her thoughts finally caught up to reality.

“Uuh...”

What had she been trying to do?

What would have happened if that plant girl named Claire had not shown up?

Would she have been unable to find a solution and simply been smashed by Salome?

Or...

Or?

“Urp!!”

She held her mouth.

She curled up on the spot.

She just barely suppressed the rising urge to vomit, but she could not suppress the tears. She sobbed again and again as her entire back shook.

“I hate dealing with stuff like this. You’ve gotta be completely insane.”

That had been an ominous prophecy.

It would have been simple to write it off as some crazy girl’s nonsense.

But it echoed in her ears nonetheless.

It echoed there and would not go away.

“I’m crazy enough that people call me a mass murderer behind my back, but you’re gonna take it even further than me if you keep going in this direction.”

She curled up and curled up and curled up.

She trembled and trembled and trembled.

The unstable girl finally tried to swallow it all down.

But...

Just as she prepared to stand up on her unsteady legs, a question slipped into her brain based on the information planted there by the mass murderer.

——*Then what are you going to do?*

“...Ah...”

——*Can you really remain normal? Can you just really remain where you are?*

“*Yes.*”

The biting chill of the wind struck the girl.

Her shaking finally stopped.

Misaka Mikoto slowly but surely stood up.

She stood up.

Between the Lines 2

“Well, this is it...”

It was more than four times larger than a school gym.

A woman in a cheap suit and lab coat sighed as she looked around the vast space.

She was Kihara Yuiitsu.

The countless halogen lights hanging down from the tall, tall ceiling swept away all of the night’s darkness. But while the space was filled with light even more dazzling than midday, it was lacking in heating equipment and the biting December chill mercilessly permeated it.

Her breath was white even indoors, but Yuiitsu seemed to be enjoying herself. This actually seemed to give an edge to the speed of her thoughts.

The large space looked like a plane crash investigation.

Bent and mangled metal parts were methodically lined up with alphanumeric plates set up next to them. And those parts belonged to military weapons that would never find their way into civilian hands: excitation rods for laser emission, large missile containers, bunker-busting drills, sprayers for flame throwers or liquid nitrogen, various types of armor and rocket boosters, etc.

Altogether, they were the Anti-Art Attachment.

Not even Kihara Yuiitsu could fully grasp that far-too-unique weapon system and it belonged to someone who was no longer with her.

“Is this what you *want to know about*, Yuiitsu-chan?”

The small girl next to her, Kihara Enshuu, tilted her head.

She was an expert at emulating the other Kiharas using the screens of smartphones, handheld devices, and handheld game consoles. It was possible she could approach a Kihara Noukan that Kihara Yuiitsu was unfamiliar with.

Yuiitsu smiled.

“I still can’t believe that he was taken out, but the facts are the facts. And I will take appropriate revenge on the bastard that did that to him. That’s a given. ...But if they could defeat him, then their power must be complete overkill. If I try to figure this out after running across them, I’ll be taken out in a single blow, unfortunately.”

Kihara Yuiitsu was a researcher through and through, so she did not believe in praying to god or karma. What had happened back then? She would dredge up every last piece of information and have a plan to defeat her enemy before actually confronting them.

She had two hints.

First, the Anti-Art Attachment had bizarre scars that did not look like anything from this world.

And second, the Anti-Art Attachment itself.

Know your enemy and know yourself and you need not fear even a hundred battles. Only investigating one side would not make for a proper analysis. She had to know the details of everything related to that battle, so she had to rudely tear away the mysterious veil surrounding her former teacher.

“Um, Yuiitsu-chan? Did you not find anything on Noukan-chan’s storage or cloud? Are you relying on me because it was too complexly encrypted?”

“Well...”

For some reason, the woman in cheap suit and lab coat hesitated a moment and awkwardly scratched at her cheek.

“I did get into it, but all I found was a virtual Doberman figurine, a collection of a Great Pyrenees links, a digital handshake ticket for a District 15 Tosa idol, and data for a St. Bernard body pillow that could be ordered with a single click. Yeah, so I thought digging any deeper would be a violation of romance...”

“?”

The two of them weaved between the piles of wreckage and finally arrived at the center of the vast space.

That area alone was empty.

Or perhaps it was the spot where the golden retriever should have been.

“Okay, are you ready to get started?”

“Yes, but...”

Kihara Enshuu seemed unusually hesitant.

The cheap suit and lab coat woman frowned and the small girl continued.

“You won’t get mad, Yuiitsu-chan?”

“Why would I?”

“Well, you’ve had a really scary look on your face for a while now.”

“Oh.”

Yuiitsu relaxed her shoulders.

Or she thought she did.

“Not to worry. I’m just a little irritated that this person in front of me might know a side of that teacher I wasn’t aware of. But that’s just the skill you have, so you haven’t done anything wrong. Right?”

Enshuu tilted her head because she apparently could not understand that human subtlety.

At any rate, she had permission, so she grabbed one of the many devices dangling from her neck. A complex waveform appeared on the small screen.

“Yes, yes.”

She muttered something of unclear meaning.

“*I understand. Noukan-chan would do this...*”

As Kihara Enshuu stared at the screen with her pupils dilated, irregular convulsions ran through her entire body. Yuiitsu gently supported the small girl’s back as she jerked about.

In a seemingly kind yet actually forceful action, she whispered sweetly into Enshuu’s ear.

“What do you see?”

“Ah, ahh...ahhh...”

“Enshuu-chan.”

She bit the girl’s earlobe and gently stroked her back. A mother rubbed her baby’s back to stimulate the parasympathetic nerves and physically provide calming signals. But Yuiitsu had a different intent. Her fingers dug in to carve out signals of displeasure that mercilessly prevented Enshuu from departing for a world of trance-like dreams.

With nowhere to escape to, Enshuu's mind raged within her small body, her shoulders and hips jerked around a few more times, and then she finally focused on reality again.

She spoke with weak and feverish breaths.

"I...don't understand it."

"..."

"But I know a familiar sensation. This is the same feeling...as when I tried to dive inside Kagun-chan..."

"Oh, I see."

Yuiitsu grinned and let go of Enshuu's back.

Kihara Kagun, aka Bersi.

He was a heretic among heretics who had reached for techniques beyond science despite being a Kihara. Yuiitsu had some fragmentary information about his self-destructive strategy taken against Kihara Byouri at the end of the Eastern European Baggage City affair.

Kihara Yuiitsu herself had been the one to draw up the blueprints for handling the commotion in Baggage City, so the Board of Directors could not restrict her access to information on what had happened there.

"Pant, pant."

With all strength gone from her body and no more support from the fellow Kihara, the girl crumpled weakly to the floor.

She looked up at Yuiitsu with damp eyes and still managed to force out some words.

"But this is different again from Kagun-chan. It isn't that there are unreadable corrupted files 'inside' Noukan-chan. It's more like there's a link there and carelessly accessing it will send you somewhere else entirely. The source of what made Noukan-chan special must have been 'outside' of him..."

(That explains it.)

Yuiitsu smiled warmly, but her brain worked coldly.

(That's why Kihara Enshuu was isolated in that juvenile hall even though she didn't really need punishment. Someone...someone on the same level as sensei was afraid of having this decoded.)

Kihara Enshuu was not an expert at trickery, but it still had to have been incredibly difficult to get her to hole up deep inside that prison like it was a luxury hotel while thinking it was her own idea. Whoever this was had pulled it off splendidly. It had been enough to completely overturn her murderous schedule and the joy of being needed by those around her.

Yuiitsu's list of candidates was quite short.

And just one person on that list had any real connection with the Kihara brand.

(The Archetype Controller. So it's that Board Chairman.)

"Was I..."

Breathing heavily and face flushed, Enshuu forced her voice from her throat.

"Was I useful, Yuiitsu-chan? Did this...really help...?"

"Yes, so don't worry."

(I just wanted confirmation from someone else that a normal Kihara can't analyze this.)

She supported the back of the small girl on the floor, gently held her in her arms, and whispered in the ear of this fellow Kihara who had beads of sweat running down her forehead.

She whispered sweetly, kindly, and compassionately.

"Hey, Enshuu-chan? If you're that worried, you can always emulate me...emulate Kihara Yuiitsu."

"Yes, yes. I understand. Yuiitsu Onee-chan would do-...!?"

Enshuu could not finish.

This time, her head dropped as if the thin thread supporting it had snapped. When she saw the girl completely lose consciousness, Kihara Yuiitsu carelessly let go like a child tossing aside a doll she was tired of playing with.

Yuiitsu's expression remained unchanged.

(Oh, dear. Does this mean I have one foot planted on "the other side", just like him?)

"Now, then," she said quietly.

She left the giant indoor space to gather her thoughts. She did not hesitate to turn her back on the empty spot her beloved golden retriever, Kihara Noukan, had filled.

Some attachment remained. She had regrets.

But she saw no reason to drag them along with her. He had said so when he had left.

She no longer had to be his student. She was to surpass him and become something unique that no one else could.

"..."

She stepped outside.

She reached into her lab coat pocket and pulled out a thin rectangular case. It contained a row of quality cigars. She bit off the tip with her front teeth and placed it between her lips, but she did not light it. Still, that was enough to fill her nose with a pleasantly sweet aroma.

It was December.

She stood outside a papermaking factory late at night. Technically, it was a large box simply registered that way on paper. Kihara Noukan had had replacement weaponry for his Anti-Art Attachment in all twenty three districts and this was one of those storage facilities.

She leaned against the wall and shook the thick cigar in the corner of her mouth as she looked up into the night sky.

(This just about confirms what that power he relied on was.)

The problem had looked unprovable when viewing the numbers, but she had simply lacked the information needed to find the answer and had not even noticed that she was making leaps of logic. That had produced the error.

She only had to analyze it all one thing at a time.

It did not matter how precipitous a problem looked. The answer was always right in front of everyone's eyes; it was just that the people of that era could not see it. Universal gravitation had existed in the BCE days. The theory of relativity had formed the instant the universe came into existence. But the people of the time had not seen it because they thought the world was supported by an elephant or turtle or they thought the universe revolved around the earth.

This was not a paradox that only existed in theory or in a play on words.

These things existed as actual phenomena, so no one could keep those theories and laws to themselves.

Technology and knowledge were equal to all.

(In that case, what was the attack method, effect, conditions, and range of Kamisato Kakeru who slaughtered sensei's "power"? Could I determine that by comparing it to the behavior patterns of Niang-Niang and Nephthys that he warned me about using the term "Magic God"?)

A sound reached Yuiitsu's ears as she immersed herself in thought.

She turned her head and saw a small girl giving her a frightened look from behind the fork lift and wooden boxes used to camouflage the facility. The girl held a leash as if for a pet, but she did not have a normal dog at her feet. Perhaps due to dorm restrictions, a small pet robot was wagging its tail there.

"U-um... Miss. You have a white coat on, so are you from the health department?"

The girl hesitantly spoke to her.

It really was something she should not have done.

"Where is...*the gold doggy*?"

Kihara Yuiitsu smiled cheerfully.

A moment later, bluish-white sparks exploded in the city night.

The girl swayed to the side and collapsed onto the asphalt ground. Yuiitsu pulled a device resembling a stun gun from her lab coat pocket, but it was not actually a stun gun. It used amplification circuits to send out a high power pulse that destroyed electronic circuits and unlocked doors, but she had further modified it to work on people.

Simply put, it could erase the short-term memories of anyone within ten meters.

The electric signals stored in the cerebral nerves were destroyed and rendered unreadable.

In a way, it was the nastiest nonlethal weapon.

"Just like a chop to the neck or a punch to the stomach, not actually damaging the brain isn't easy."

Rather than the collapsed girl, Kihara Yuiitsu approached the pet robot that lacked the ability to sense the danger. She picked it up, inserted a cable, and read its internal memory. It did not seem to be the type that wirelessly recorded things to the cloud. Not that she had been very worried since she would have received advance warning if it had been sending out electromagnetic waves or an infrared signal.

After modifying a few of the image records, Kihara Yuiitsu slowly exhaled.

She set down the pet robot after switching it off.

Killing any witnesses, regardless of age or sex, would be faster. It reduced the risk of the memories or records being repaired. More importantly, it was much more Kihara-like.

But she did not do that.

She clicked her tongue, pulled out her cellphone, and called someone.

“Yes, yes. Case C has occurred, so take response #4. I already took out their ‘eyes’, so you have to deal with that. Prioritize removing everything from the site and erasing all traces within twenty minutes. I’ll leave the next candidate site to you, but return to normal duties within three hours and don’t forget to set up an above average level of security. And don’t make a big commotion. That would gather attention and have the opposite effect.”

There was no such thing as perfect security.

So instead of gathering attention by building the thickest barrier possible, she focused on blending into the background so no one would target her in the first place.

And of course, her surprised subordinates asked why.

Not that they would expect this to overturn her decision.

“Well...”

Kihara Yuiitsu did not give it much serious thought.

She simply looked down at the girl and pet robot that lay on the asphalt like they were dead. She was probably thinking about that girl whose dorm did not allow her to have a pet and the golden retriever who had given that normal person a small taste of her dream.

Then the Kihara answered with the unlit cigar in her mouth.

She did not hesitate.

“*Because that is the essence of romance,* I suppose.”

CHAPTER 3

Conversion, or a Change of Viewpoint.

Not_Fiend, Not_Enemy.

Part 1

The next morning, Kamijou Touma was in for a shock as soon as he woke up in the bathtub.

"...It's falling out."

Only after speaking the words did a chill cover his entire body.

"My hair is falling out!!"

It had not hit him until now, but just how much stressful was this new life? Not that it was all that surprising when he shared a school building with a monster like Kamisato Kakeru and his World Rejecter and the boy could attack at any time.

"Ohhhhhh!! Index's biting had already loosened the roots of Kamijou-san's hair and now the Kamisato panic delivered the finishing blow!? This can't be happening! I'm only in my teens! I'm still young! I shouldn't have to worry about my scalp! Help me, god! Help me, Othinus!!"

He was so panicked that he rolled along the floor and more or less pushed the door open with his own body to escape the bathroom.

"Are you still half asleep? You go out of your way to hole up in the bathroom, so at least wash your face before coming out."

Othinus put her hands on her hips and sounded exasperated this early in the morning.

She could only be so bold in the open space thanks to the many dolls that had been forced onto Kamijou like a curse after the previous day's rock-paper-scissors tournament. They were already being destroyed as the calico cat's playmates, so they had been bitten, torn, and strewn about with white stuffing scattered everywhere.

“You did well for a thoughtless human who has a critical lack of delicacy. You have my praise.”

“Is that so?”

“This...what is it called? Anyway, it has done well taking my place. I feel like blessing it using my position as a god.”

“Othinus, that thing you’re holding between your arms is Higozuiki-chan. It has a proper origin, but I do not recommend doing a search on it.”

He had bought plenty of food afterschool the day before, so they were finally freed from their critical food shortage. Breakfast was a miscellaneous assortment of toast, milk, and bacon cooked with asparagus because he felt like eating vegetables and meat together.

“Is it just me or are you only using the frying pan?”

“This morning is bad enough already, so I don’t even want to think about doing any dishes. My head already feels heavy.”

While eating breakfast, Kamijou Touma made an announcement.

“Othinus, you’re staying home today.”

“Don’t be silly, human. Do you really think you can restrict a god’s rights?”

“You’ll be fine. The dolls will keep the cat from attacking you for a while.”

“If you know that’s a problem, then come up with a more fundamental solution!”

Othinus shouted back at him with her hair bristling, but human-sized Kamijou and Index did not take the threat seriously. Meanwhile on the floor, the cat held down a random doll with both front paws, bit at it, pulled, and produced an ominous ripping sound.

“I’m a little scared since I can’t tell what Kamisato is up to. Regardless, having you anywhere near him would be a bad idea. He might have some other plan, but there’s a chance his mind would go blank and he’d start using World Rejecter the instant he saw you. I can’t afford to have that happen at school.”

“You have a point, but he already knows where this dorm is. Plus, he is not acting alone. Couldn’t he have others attack the dorm while you’re at school?”

“It is possible...” Kamijou looked troubled. “But based on how he’s acted, I doubt he would do that.”

“Any proof?”

“He’s afraid of the Magic Gods.” Kamijou grabbed an asparagus with his chopsticks. “He knows he can defeat them with World Rejecter, but that’s all he knows. That means he doesn’t know if he can defeat them without World Rejecter. And harming the girls around him is the one thing he wants to avoid the most. That’s actually the source of his motivation to attack the Magic Gods, so he won’t compromise there. That means *it would be a problem if he sent them on a mission and they never came back*.”

The Kamisato Faction was not some evil secret cabal.

If they sent out a team and that team was defeated, they would not arrogantly conclude that it was the team’s fault for being so weak.

In fact, they could not sacrifice a single one of their own.

That was why they sent Kamisato, their central figure, to the front line.

And with that in mind...

“However they get there, Kamisato will definitely show up for the finishing blow. I just have to pay attention to what he’s doing at school.”

“We don’t know where he gets his information. He might know I’ve lost my power as a Magic God.”

“He probably does,” agreed Kamijou. “*But he’s still afraid of the Magic Gods*. They’re the source of all of this and they’ve taken a large chunk out of his heart. He will conclude that the Magic Gods’ power and influence still exists in this world until he loses the right hand that makes him special...or that he thinks does. Even if he’s been given a logical explanation and is 99.9% convinced that you’ve lost your power, he’ll still be cautious when it comes to you. And if he cares about those girls as much as he claims to, he won’t send them on a mission like that. He will wait until he can make the move himself. It’s not a logical issue. It’s just like someone checking again and again to make sure the door is locked. He understands, but he’s still afraid.”

Yes.

Kamisato Kakeru would never think about having those girls clash with a Magic God when he was not around.

In his view, those girls had had something taken from them by the Magic Gods and that was why they were doing as he said.

They had already had something taken.

He would never leave a possibility of more being taken.

“What a pain. Is this what they call the influence of a god?”

Index had remained silent this entire time.

She did not join the conversation.

However, she did not seem in a bad mood or in deep thought.

“Hmm. I’ve been waiting so long for a normal meal like this, but it’s so normal that it’s just boring.”

“Oh, no. Now Index is approaching a much plainer sort of crisis!”

They were discussing their future plans, but time continued on all the same.

After making it clear that Index and Othinus would be staying home, Kamijou prepared to leave for school.

He looked carefree, but school was where he needed to figure out what Kamisato, the center of his unease, was up to. And if Kamisato did not show up or left early, he could conclude that something was going to happen.

“I’ll be back later.”

“Be back before it gets dark. ...In all seriousness, I get the feeling that something is going to happen.”

Kamijou left the dorm.

He carelessly started on his usual path to school but then remembered he had a new school to go to.

The sense of danger gradually caught up with him.

(Huh? Does that mean it might be further away and I might not make it in time?)

He paled.

He quickly changed direction, but then he spotted a familiar face.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

He panicked because running into some Biri Biri trouble now could be disastrous, held-back levels of disastrous, but then he frowned.

There was something there.

He could not put it to words, but something was wrong.

“Hey?”

In an extremely rare occurrence, Kamijou was the one to initiate the conversation between them.

Not even he was sure what mindset had led him to do that.

“What?”

But the instant she turned around and their eyes met, he distinctly felt a chill race down his spine.

But not because the look on her face frightened him. Her Tokiwadai Middle School uniform was clean and not dirty in any way.

And yet his entire body was stricken by a hopeless shudder like the tip of a bloody Japanese sword was pointed between his eyes.

(What...is this?)

He could not find an answer.

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto smiled.

All she did was smile.

“Aren’t you going to buy a winter coat or something? It looks like you’re wearing layers, but aren’t you cold with just that?”

There was nothing concerning in what she said either.

Nothing about it should have brought any tension or sense of danger, yet the idea that something was off only grew as their time together grew.

Her smile looked like a thin rubber film being pushed out by fingers within.

Her too-perfect tone of voice sounded like it was made with a metal diaphragm.

“Oh...”

“?”

He finally figured it out.

It was not something there that scared him. It was the opposite. Something was not there. There was something he could not see or understand. Misaka Mikoto was smiling and speaking, but the heart and inner thoughts behind it were not reaching him.

“Well, I have to go this way. I want to stop by the office before classes start. I’m hoping it isn’t too late to change my elective gym selection for the third term.”

She sounded entirely casual.

And yet he felt like he shared nothing with this person.

“The standard would be arresting techniques, aikido, self-defense, or fencing to focus on my Iron Sand Sword, but if I want to go more the Railgun route, maybe sharpshooting or archery would be better. Well, I guess anything’s fine *as long as it’s useful.*”

“Did...something happen?”

He asked his question far too late.

“Yes.”

Mikoto did not say what it was.

She simply smiled and gave her answer.

“*And now I can’t assume I’m setting the pace at the head of the pack.*”

“.....”

He could not even chase after her as she left.

What?

What was going on?

Part 2

Kamijou walked slowly to school like a drunk following his homing instinct. He may have been following his usual routine to lessen the burden on his mind as much as possible.

The new school seemed to be closer to the dorm than the old one, so he arrived earlier than expected.

Or maybe he was no longer able to control the length of his strides.

He saw the new school scene filled with a variety of uniforms. After passing through the main gate, he spotted the student council president...what was her name? Anyway, he saw that palm-sized Jumpy Bunny vanishing back behind the school building.

He decided to follow her and found her at the trash dump.

She wore her uniform and had rubber gloves on her hands. A gelatin drink called “A Banana to Fill Your Mouth First Thing in the Morning” sold at convenience stores sat on top of the chained and padlocked lid of the incinerator. He did not do it himself, but Kamijou had heard of people going for fruits like banana, acai, or blueberry to wake them up in the morning. He mainly heard about it on TV.

Which meant...

“Hey, are you eating breakfast here?”

“Wahyah!?”

She hopped straight up when he called out to her from behind.

She must have thought he would take it because she quickly snatched up the gelatin drink. That was apparently a mistake because it erupted up out of the opening at the top.

It poured down over her head and she fell onto her butt.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what is this!? Oh, it’s Problem Student #2-kun. You really scared me. Huh? Or am I in trouble all alone here with a problem student?”

“If you get it, then work on either closing your spread legs or on wiping that sticky white banana drink out of your hair. As things are, I’m not sure where to look... But I can see why you need a middle school underclassman to make you a lunch every day.”

“Nn. But this is the perfect meal because it’s healthy and you don’t have to get your hands dirty like with a rice ball or a sandwich. Mie-chan is just overprotective and worries too much.”

“That’s not the issue. This is just as bad as eating in the bathroom. Maybe I should tell that Akikawa girl about this...”

“Eeek! Eeeeeeek!! Um, Mie-chan is really scary when she’s mad. She piles up a bunch of arguments like a falling block puzzle and it feels like they’re crushing you!”

“Why are you always the one being scolded, student council president?”

The president seemed to be looking after the trash as usual. It was possible she would stay there until the garbage truck showed up and the garbage man actually took the garbage away without injury. Or maybe she intended to help load it into the truck.

After some thought, Kamijou asked a question.

“Should I stay?”

“No need. If I’m shorthanded I can talk to Mie-chan and call for the rest of the student council.”

“So that’s why you email her at the drop of the hat. Is she your servant?”

“Eeeek! Eeeeeeeeeeeeek!!”

Arguing was not going to help, so he decided to leave the president for the time being.

His biggest reason was a simple one.

He had seen a boy enter through the back gate so as not to be seen.

This boy was a registered student of the school, but he did not wear either of its uniforms.

It was Kamisato Kakeru.

“Do you know something?”

Kamijou had no real basis for the question he asked the instant he saw the boy.

It may have been closer to a simple outburst.

“Someone I know was acting weird, Kamisato. Do you know what might-...”

“Salome is here.” Kamisato actually cut him off. “How large is the Kamijou Faction? Being in Academy City isn’t enough to keep them safe. I have no idea how many she might have ‘snacked on’ before arriving in this city! If you have a way of contacting them, then do it. I want to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed!!”

If something had happened, Kamijou had expected Kamisato to play dumb.

He had been prepared to read some subtle changes in the boy’s expression and tone of voice, so he was taken aback.

“Salome?”

“From your point of view, I guess she would be a member of the Kamisato Faction. She’s also my little sister. We’re not blood-related, though.” Kamisato gave a gentle sigh. “But she’s completely out of control. No matter what I say or how many people try to stop her, she will spread destruction without end once she’s taken action. Oh, dammit. This is why we used some electrodes to cut off her neurotransmitters and keep her brainwaves below a functional level. As long as she can be kept below the critical point where she can infinitely work herself up with her own words, you can speak with her normally.”

Kamijou felt dread sneaking in through his skin.

It was just like when he had faced Misaka Mikoto earlier.

“How can I believe that? She’s part of the Kamisato Faction, right? I already know that entire group is centered on you! For better or for worse, those girls won’t act without your go sign. Right!?”

“Do you remember Claire? She’s the Gemstone esper who used to be in the gardening club. She’s the one with all of her cells almost identical to plant matter.”

“Yeah, what about her?”

She had played an important role in saving Patricia Birdway, so she had left a stronger impression than the rest of the Kamisato Faction.

But the “normal high school boy” had this to say:

“Last night, she had a run-in with Salome and her body was sliced in two.”

He said it so readily.

An extreme oddity enveloped everything.

“...”

“Fortunately, her power allowed her to survive. ...But for anyone but Claire, that would have been a one-way ticket to the afterlife. And I’m not saying Salome only did that because it was Claire. She would do the exact same thing to Ellen, Elza, or anyone else who stood in her way.”

“What...is going on?”

“I don’t know either. But if something’s wrong on your end, odds are good it was caused by Salome. At the very least, I haven’t made a direct ‘request’ to her. If I wanted a war, I already would have attacked you. I want you to know that Salome is acting on her own here.”

Kamisato mussed up his bangs with a hand.

Then he spoke up as if he had just remembered something.

“A long time ago, Salome and I played a board game together. It was a minor foreign-made one and all the instructions were in German, so we had to translate it into English and then convert that to Japanese. All in all, learning the rules was a pain. Oh, and this was before she ‘broke’.”

“?”

That phrasing bothered him, but getting this story out of Kamisato came first.

“It was an election game. You rolled the dice, moved your game piece along, and played your cards as you competed to become president. You can think of it as a variant of sugoroku. And since it was a fictional game, you could use all sorts of methods. You could buy up all the TV stations and newspapers to advertise yourself like crazy. You could sabotage your opponent’s campaign vans so they got into accidents and affected your opponent’s public image. You could even steal ballot boxes just before the votes were counted for a last minute reversal. The ridiculous freedom it gave you was what made it so much fun.”

“And?”

“What method do you think Salome used?”

Kamisato gave a hopelessly calm smile.

“Assassination. She gathered up all of those cards and used them all at once when the time came. And she didn’t assassinate the VIPs who required a really lucky roll for success. She would force her way into the normal houses of her opponent’s supporters and slaughter them. The limited VIPs were one thing, but you couldn’t protect all of your supporters. There was no stopping her. If someone so much as announced support of that candidate, she would kill them. If they brought the candidate up in conversation, they were a target. That forced everyone to leave the candidate. We laughed because it had turned into a Central or South American election where threats are more effective than persuasion.”

“You’re kidding, right? Then if Salome’s here in Academy City...?”

“It’s essentially the same. We both have our own faction and she’s trying to make yours crumble away so I can win. And instead of taking out you at the top, she’s focusing on the defenseless friends surrounding you. It isn’t quite the same as making an example out of a punished criminal, but once she devours a few of them, she thinks your base will crumble away and your circle of friends will scatter. So she won’t stop preying on them until they do scatter. Do you get the situation now?”

Was this why Mikoto had been acting odd?

Had she already run into Salome and had her life put in danger?

“...”

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” was all Kamijou said.

(That doesn't fit with what I saw. She didn't seem to be trembling in fear and afraid to bring up the incident. I felt something more ominous and hopelessly muddy.)

Something seemed horribly off, but that was only the impression he had received.

He had no proof of anything.

It would be better to solidify his footing with just the things he knew for sure. If it was true Claire had been bisected, Salome's violence went beyond a mere fight. If he made a mistake and was too slow, then someone he knew really could end up dead.

The violence and killing were not the goal.

She was trying to work up the masses and control the general direction of his group as a whole. In a way, it was a perfect example of the original definition of a terrorist.

Of course, it was possible this was all some plot of the Kamisato Faction.

Claire's bisection could just be an act and this Salome person might not even exist. They may have been trying to scare Kamijou into contacting everyone he knew so they could write up a list of the entire Kamijou Faction.

However...

"Hey, Kamisato."

"What?"

"What if I told you it was me that sliced Claire in two, not Salome?"

"*Do you want me to kill you right here and now?*'"

Kamisato Kakeru's voice definitely grew a level deeper.

He skipped straight past his catch phrase about wishing for a new world.

To be blunt, Kamisato was not a trustworthy person, but Kamijou felt this at least was not a lie. He knew Kamisato would never sacrifice any of the girls around him. No matter the reason, even if that was the shortest route to his goal, and even if Claire herself offered to slice her belly open. That "normal high school boy" would never allow it.

"Okay, I get it. So what do we do? If this Salome person is wandering around Academy City as she pleases and she'll bite at anyone I know that she comes across, what can we do?"

“My only advice is that you have them defend themselves. I’m doing everything I can do track Salome down, but I don’t know how much success I’ll have. She is a mass murderer. That monster camouflages herself within the crowds and, next thing you know, she’s dyed society red. And once she dives down into that sea of people, she won’t show herself until she attacks her prey.”

“Where did you get this information from? How much can you trust them?”

“Sunny and Rain. They’re fortuneteller sisters and they can gather very precise information over a very wide area using a globe that provides a weather map of the entire planet and the movement of the stars. Sometimes they even scatter silver iodide or dry ice from an airplane to alter the weather conditions and thus guide destiny in the direction they want. Those excellent Weather Girls were a powerful presence when it came to the weather market and weather derivatives, so their online trading was an important source of funds. ...Until, that is, they removed the electrodes that acted as Salome’s fuse, failed to control that mass murderer in her critical state, and were attacked.”

Kamijou clicked his tongue.

Fortunetelling was a common technique on the magic side and he did not know how that differed from the technique that the Kamisato Faction had access to, but if they could access secret information like that, it was a fatal blow to any kind of data security. They could steal all the data they wanted even with the strongest firewall in place and even if the wire to the internet was physical severed.

That explained how the Kamisato Faction knew so much about personal memories. It could be online or offline and it could be mechanical memory or biological memory. They essentially had a global interception system in place.

“What did those sisters want to do with Salome?”

“I don’t know and it makes my head hurt. I guess we weren’t as solid a group as I thought. I was doing everything I could to ensure there wasn’t too much friction between them all, but something I wasn’t aware of must have happened.”

Positive emotions did not necessarily create smooth relationships.

In fact, a rumor with no statistical basis claimed over half of unplanned crimes were related to a romance in some way. And when focused on just Kamisato to such an extreme, that group had to be quite twisted. It was possible someone wanted to eliminate Salome by inciting her to action so she would end up in an accident.

What had happened to Sunny and Rain was unknown, but based on how Kamisato had presented this, they could not be in any state to move properly. That meant the Kamisato Faction had lost its radar and that made it all the harder to locate Mass Murderer Salome inside Academy City.

On top of that, Salome had escaped the predictions of those sisters who could predict things on a global scale.

If she had attacked them badly enough that they could not predict the future, it meant she had ignored whatever was supposedly predetermined and then harmed them.

Normal means would not be enough to find her.

And as they fell behind like that, blood would fill the city streets.

Kamijou sighed and arranged the conditions in his mind.

"Kamisato, you said Salome spreads out her targets over as wide an area as possible so no one knows who she'll attack next. Since you can't protect everyone, there will always be an opening. She would want to maintain that advantageous position."

"Yes. What about it?"

"But her overall objective is still me. She wants to weaken or even defeat me."

"Get to the point."

"Let me answer your question with a question of my own. She's decided I'm at the very top, so what if she sees me wandering around? Even if she can continue going after the gallery, won't she attack me directly if she has the chance?"

"..."

"And this isn't an election game we're talking about. It's a direct fistfight. It's a war. There's no need to wait until election day. If the two of us are fighting in the streets and if I gain the upper hand, she won't be able to wait around. After all, her ultimate goal is to ensure you win, so her efforts are wasted if you, the big boss, are eliminated. She won't be able to sit idly by. Even if it means throwing away her advantage, she'll definitely come to save you. In shogi, going after your opponent's rook or bishop is meaningless if your own king is taken."

"I see. You have a point." Kamisato shrugged. "If we can't track her down, it's faster to create a situation where we know she'll show up. That does make sense."

"Just to be clear, you'll be selling out your ally here. And your sister at that."

"That's exactly why I need to do this. I don't want any of those girls to end up a perpetrator or a victim. I just want to return this goddamn convenient harem."

Kamisato pulled out his cellphone.

“In that case, I’ll make some calls. I’m fine with a fistfight in the streets, but if we put on too realistic a performance, Elza and the like would probably rush in to kill you.”

“No, that would actually be perfect. If your faction isn’t freaking out over it, Salome might notice something isn’t right and refuse to get close.”

“Do you not know how frightening girls can be?”

“I’d like to believe they’re marshmallow-like creatures full of compassion and kindness, but it doesn’t sound like we have time for that now.”

Their plan was set.

But there was another problem that Kamijou had to deal with first.

“What do I do? Really, what do I do about my attendance!? We’re not even talking about how many days I have left! I’m already in the negative territory where it’s hard to see how I can make up for it no matter how hard I try! So what in the world do I do!?”

“Hmm.”

Kamisato Kakeru did not give it much thought.

He simply gave an idea.

“Why not ask a classmate to answer the roll call for you?”

.....

A miniature universe exploded inside Kamijou Touma.

He faced heaven and let out a roar

“Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

If it was that simple, couldn’t he have been doing that ever since the second term started? Even if it only worked once every ten times, that would still have bought him a few days. Then he would not have had one foot in the “held back” zone and he could have focused on this mission more easily.

But it was all too late.

All the lost time made him feel like an idiot.

“Ahhh! Ahhhh!! Ahhhhhh!!!!!”

“I know you want to revert to infancy, but I’m not going to play the mother role. I’m pretty sure it would be really bad for my back.”

Crying was not going to help.

To make use of this slight chance, he grabbed his phone and called Aogami Pierce.

“Answer the roll call for you? Sure, but will that really work in a small high school classroom? Don’t blame me if she sees right through it.”

“I believe in you, Aogami! ...And what’s that commotion in the background? Did something happen?”

“I’m planning a bit of an event. I want to check the wiring, so I need to visit the faculty room. It’s times like this when I’m glad I carry figurine repair putty with me wherever I go. If the tool doesn’t work, I might need a spare key.”

“Hm? Hmm?”

“I’ll tell you later. Tonight’s gonna be great!!”

Aogami hung up, but at least Kamijou had someone to answer the roll call for him.

Now they needed to get moving.

“Do you know where Salome might go? No, I guess we wouldn’t be having all this trouble if you did. Still, she needs to see us fighting if we’re going to lure her out.”

“Let’s use a video site. She always preferred online videos to TV. If we upload our fight disguised as an amateur witnessing it, she’ll come running no matter where she is.”

“I guess that leaves just one thing.”

“Yes, let’s do it near a recognizable landmark she can see in the background.”

Part 3

The barefoot girl wore raincoats directly over her bare, swimsuit tan-lined skin and had her long silver hair wrapped like disks or demon horns on either side of her head.

She was Mass Murderer Salome.

Her treasure was the list left by Sunny and Rain. She could achieve her current goal simply by continuing to attack the people on it.

The list may have been a symbol of tragedy, but its presence was a good thing for Academy City as a whole.

Without it, her targets would not have been so limited.

She would have randomly chosen Academy City residents and indiscriminately attacked them in a way that directed negative emotions toward Kamijou Touma and rejected him from society.

“Here we go.”

Salome muttered to herself while sitting on a bus station bench. Now that the morning student rush hour was over, that bench had become a rest area with zero customer traffic, so she had used it to lie in wait for someone.

She honestly had nothing against her opponent.

It just had to be someone on the list.

“Accelerator-chan☆ ...Your real name is surprisingly cute.”

“...”

Her target had white hair and red eyes. One hand held a cane with a modern design and the other held a plastic bag from a drug store. He reminded Salome of white asparagus. No one could end up like that without being thrown into a uniquely arranged environment.

“Academy City’s #1. Since you’re famous, you’ve gotta be used to things like this. I’m here to kill you real quick.”

“...”

“Oh? You’re not onboard with that? Maybe you need some more motivation. Are you gonna say something like ‘I will never kill again (sparkle☆)’? Heh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha!! After everything you did, do you really think you can rid yourself of allllll that bad stuff you did and become a nice clean good person? Hyah hyah hyah hyah hyah!!”

“...”

“And you can’t just rid yourself of killings, don’tcha think?”

The raincoat girl’s smile vanished and an odd emptiness filled her eyes.

“We’re different. Then again, a proper human being might laugh if they heard that since it’s like a rapist insisting he isn’t as bad as a cannibal. Still, we’re different. If anyone wanted to put us in the same category, that would be more than enough reason to kill them, don’tcha think? But even if we’re different, I can still tell. You can’t get rid of your killing. Not even if we were the only people left in the world and I raised my hands and said I’d grown out of killing.”

“...”

“How about a little test?”

She laughed.

With the waterproof hood over her head, Salome held out her index finger.

She pointed at Accelerator.

No, at the plastic bag in his hand.

“I can understand the milk and chocolate. The rubber ducky and shampoo hat might just be your idea of a fun bath time. ...But there’s just no way your feet would fit in those tiny shoes, don’tcha think? In that case, might their owner be somewhere nearb-...”

Before she could finish speaking, Salome’s pointer finger and the arm attached to it were gone.

He had not done anything special.

He had simply approached her, simply grabbed her arm, and simply torn it off.

The series of actions merely had some vector manipulation involved to provide superhuman speed.

“Hyah.”

But...

“Hyah hyah hyah hyah!! Oh, wow. I’ve gotta have struck the jackpot here!!”

No pain or fear filled Mass Murderer Salome’s mind.

In fact, she showed the relief and excitement of someone who had finally run across another eccentric that could discuss an old movie that had long since stopped playing.

She took a step back and the bottom of her double raincoat floated out like a jellyfish or clione. She bent forward and held her stomach with her remaining arm while not even trying to hide her continued laughter.

Then she used that remaining hand to grab the toy pocket watch hanging from her neck and kissed it.

“My External Offering can absorb any weapon or armor that I can destroy barehanded and build it into my own power. And after that snowball rolls down the hill far enough, no one can stop the chain, don’tcha think? So that’s the thing. I’m not a good match for people who don’t rely on civilized tools such as weapons and shields. There isn’t much I can do when they’re stupider than a chimpanzee and just use their own two arms.”

“You...”

“Spare me any hackneyed lines like ‘What did you do to your body? (sparkle☆)’. Heh heh. At the very least, it isn’t as strange as that brain of yours.”

There was a sound like the straining of a wet roll of thread.

No blood came from the torn raincoat and severed arm.

It also felt odd.

The surface of her brown suntanned arm was smooth, but it contained the inhuman eeriness of a mannequin.

“See, what matters for a sacrifice is how important it is to the person offering it. If you had such a great season that you have way more food than you could ever eat, then rice or fish isn’t gonna count as a sacrifice. And some stranger you abduct won’t work as a living sacrifice. Do you know anything about Voodoo rituals? When they sell their soul to the devil, once a year they have to offer up someone who it pains them to sacrifice: a family member, a lover, a beloved teacher, etc. But once they run out of people, they’ve gotta pay with their own life. This is the same. Only the External Offering just wasn’t quiiiiite enough for peace of mind as a mass murderer. I needed to offer up something even more precious...and that’s where the Internal Offering comes in. *In other words, I gave my own body to my god.*”

A living sacrifice.

The simplest form was to exchange one’s own life for having a wish granted.

But even if she surrendered her own heart, there was a way to survive.

She replaced herself and turned herself into a tool.

Misaka Mikoto should have noticed, but she had been distracted by the initial impact. The External Offering was a form of the occult that absorbed any weaponry that Salome destroyed with her own hands. But grabbing and breaking the Iron Sand Sword was beyond the limits of martial arts. A normal human could never do that.

“This is messed up.”

Accelerator glanced at the torn-off arm, tossed it aside, and spat out his comment.

But he was not interested in her occult explanation or that she had replaced her flesh and blood body for an artificial one.

“*That’s not made in Academy City*.”

“Ha ha ha! I guess you would notice. Yeah, I have no connection to this crazy city. So I had to gather together whatever I could find, open up my own gut, and exchange it all on my own. And all the while, I sold off each part of my maiden’s body to my god.”

She made it sound simple.

But if it was not made in Academy City, there was little guarantee it would work properly. If it was handmade, no one else could fix it in an emergency and odds were good it was not perfectly shielded against germs, chemicals, rust, electromagnetic waves, etc.

Even if you needed it to keep your heart beating, would anyone really use a pacemaker made using the chip taken from a toy gimmick light or alarm clock sold at a 100 yen shop?

Yet just such a reckless person stood before him.

For one thing, why was Salome wearing raincoats directly over her naked body?

Was she placing a frosted glass filter over her distorted artificial body to make it look real? Or had she needed to cover her entire body with thick plastic to keep water and dust out?

She was partners with death in more ways than one.

Rust or germs could reach her brain at any moment.

She was truly an insane mass murderer.

But her smile remained intact as if she were enjoying this tightrope walk as a form of entertainment.

“But you’ve gotta be more insane than me. You claim you don’t kill anymore, but you didn’t hesitate to rip off someone’s arm which has gotta knock people unconscious from traumatic shock. That’s the same as Mr. Elephant claiming to be friends with the humans while also throwing rocks at them, don’tcha think?”

“Then would you prefer I gave you a nice pat on the head?”

“With that hand? Don’t joke. Who knows how many times you’d shake up my brain.”

The raincoat girl smiled as she pulled something from her pocket. It was not a pen nor was it a stick of candy. It was a steel hook and it was probably meant to stab into a human’s back and lift them up. She spun that cruel execution tool in her fingers like a pen and then bent it between her fingers.

It looked like some kind of ritual.

It looked like someone lighting their glow stick at a concert.

“But just as my data said, your trigger is the one called Last Order. I’m not trying to provoke you this time. I’m completely serious. Isn’t it exhausting living like that? No matter who or what you protect, it won’t wipe your history clean. Hanging around good people, heroes, and holy women isn’t going to make you any of those things. You’ve gotta understand that. You think going to a concert makes you one with the idol? You think wearing a limited edition happi coat and waving fans around links your hearts together? Did you know the performer can’t even see the audience’s faces in the darkness created by the bright lights shining on the stage? That’s exactly the position you’re in, don’tcha think?”

“...I know that.”

“But if you’re happy clinging to the announcement of a new song and going to every last performance of the national tour, from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, then I won’t stop you.”

“I know that, I know that, I know that, but it still pulls the trigger.”

“*How long are you going to be some little kid’s attachment?* The title of the strongest is weeping.”

Something dry burst between the two of them.

Two low voices acted as a signal.

“I’ll kill you.”

“Feeling motivated now?”

Plenty of blades, blunt weapons, and projectiles overflowed from the sports bag.

A clash between two who knew the taste of killing immediately followed.

Part 4

District 7 had all the basics, making it a convenient district to live in, but that also meant it was difficult to find any major landmarks. Kamijou and Kamisato wanted to fake a fight on an online video so Salome would contact them, so they wanted to surreptitiously slip in something anyone would recognize.

“What should we do? All I know about this place is from the sightseeing pamphlets.”

“That’s right. I guess we should go with the Windowless Building. Some VIP called the Board Chairman lives there, so it can supposedly survive a nuclear attack just fine. That should be listed on the guide maps at any train station.”

With that, the two of them changed direction.

But as soon as they did, over one thousand copper coins filled the area above Kamijou Touma’s head like a meteor storm.

“Eh...?”

At first, he did not know what this meant.

As he stood there dumbly, the downpour of projectiles descended like a suspended ceiling and quickly reached him. He frantically raised his right hand overhead, but that was no help. Orange sparks filled the air, a cloud of dust formed as the asphalt was torn away, and the spiky-haired boy was struck all over and bounced a few times as he rolled along the road.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Finding himself on his side, he arched his back and screamed, but he could not get up.

Meanwhile, someone waved down from the roof of a short multi-tenant building.

“Yahoo. Everything going all right, boss?”

The delinquent girl’s long brown hair was cut so that two tufts looked like fox ears. She held an empty plastic bottle upside down in her hands. When she shook it a little, the countless ten yen coins wriggled on the road. They slowly gathered together in a whirlwind shape.

The unharmed boy waved back from the ground.

“*Right on schedule, Elza.*”

“Heh heh heh. He praised me.”

Intense heat spiraled through Kamijou's head.

Was this how it would be? Did Kamisato not care about any damage to his side after all? Would he let Mass Murderer Salome go on her rampage, harm all sorts of people in Academy City, and leave the people and world Kamijou cared about floating in a pool of blood? And would he consider that a happy ending as he clapped his hands and smiled at his new high score?

"Ka...mi...satooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!"

"Pipe down. Sure I betrayed you, but I'm giving you what you want. This is the best way to stop my sister."

Kamijou did not understand.

Unless...

"Hey, Kamijou Touma. Do you remember what I told you? Salome is slaughtering your friends and acquaintances so that my group will win. Then isn't the solution obvious? You decided that having Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru clash in front of the camera and faking my defeat would send her running to us. But there's still a risk of Salome realizing it's an act, not being fooled, and continuing her killing. Basically, it leaves the initiative in the hands of that sister that's known as a mass murderer. That's a risk we can't afford to take. So I like the sound of a simpler and surefire method that takes the initiative away from her."

"What...are you...?"

"You just have to die."

World Rejecter gave the simplest death sentence possible.

"Remember what I said? Salome's goal is to guide my faction to victory. So we just have to make sure you, the enemy king, die on camera. Do that, and her reason to fight will naturally vanish. Then you don't have to worry about any of your friends dying. And since it isn't an act, there's no risk of Salome not being fooled and remaining out of our control. Isn't that just a wonderfully perfect solution?"

"..."

Kamijou could not get up thanks to the previous impact and he could tell his pulse was racing.

An unpleasant sweat covered his palms.

The disconcerting pulsation from his neck grew louder.

“Elza.”

Kamisato sounded like he was reciting something.

“Fran, Maya, Luca.”

One was a pajama UFO girl with tons of antennae coming from her backpack as she used a giant balloon to float around. One was a ghost girl dressed in white who floated above the artificial fog machine at her feet. One was a pirate girl with an eyepatch, pirate hat, miniskirt, cutlass, and large musket.

“Aileen, Lime, Lisa, Mary, Anna, Iris, Nina, Maive, Elly, Clara, Deborah, May, Sophia, Siren, Sandy, Marine, Rosary, Scala, Yuny, Lemon, Nikita, Lemy, Machina, Catherine, Dorothea, Athena, Muse, Berry, Susan, Melon, Milcah, Amy, Linda, Fia, Snow, Laika, Honey, Eve.”

One was, one was...

Kamijou could not even speak as girl after girl appeared from every direction.

He could not move, he was hopelessly outnumbered, and each of them had undergone an extreme mutation like Claire and Elza. Each and every one of them would have been a formidable foe on her own, so he felt nothing but despair as they approached in numbers rivaling the stars in the sky.

“I hate doing this. I was supposed to be handling this, but I really do want their help here. They’ll just be holding you down while I provide the finishing blow, but just getting some help is a pretty big problem.”

Kamisato Kakeru pulled out a cheap cellphone.

He pointed the lens at his prey like the master of an insane classroom undergoing a moral hazard.

And he spoke coldly.

“I’m dirtying my hands by making this unpleasant snuff film for the sake of your friends. So at least let me finish this quickly, Kamijou Touma-kun.”

“...!!!???”

Part 5

"Whoops."

A curious look came over Mass Murderer Salome as she glanced down at her vibrating smartphone.

What had happened?

The asphalt around her was torn up, the street signs were bent, and flames rose vertically from an underground gas pipe like a flamethrower.

Someone's little sister ignored it all as she spoke to herself.

"Now, now. You're really doing something silly, cursed Onii-chan."

"Hm? The hell are you talking about?"

Academy City's #1, Accelerator, gave her a puzzled look from ten meters away. He frowned at what the raincoat girl said...or rather, at the fact that she was recklessly looking down at her phone in the middle a fight to the death with the #1.

But Salome only shrugged.

"But depending how this plays out, it could be interesting, don'tcha think?"

She laughed.

"Hey, #1. Let's call it quits here. I'll give you a little more time to live as a pitiful little attachment."

"Do you really think I give a shit about what you want?"

"Oh, I think you will."

Salome rolled her head around.

"Kanou Shinka."

"?"

"Fremea Seivelun, Fräulein Kreutune, Kuroyoru Umidori, Misaka Worst, and Last Order. Such naughty children, not going to school. And if the unfortunate befalls a naughty child, that's gotta count as divine punishment, right?"

"..."

"Yes, you can't possibly know where all of them are, can you? And there are plenty more on my list, maybe even some in that crowd over there. I'm fine with continuing here and I doubt you've got anything to be afraid of with your reflection. ...But will every single projectile you reflect back really end up hitting me? And if they don't, we'll have some stray shots and ricochets flying around, don'tcha think?"

He hesitated for just a moment.

Mass Murderer Salome used that opening to leap backwards. Her double raincoats fluttered like a dancer's veil. In an act impossible for a flesh and blood body, she jumped onto the sign sticking out from a building wall, jumped up onto the rooftop, and began travelling quickly from building to building.

A chill stabbed into her back almost immediately.

She did not even need to turn back to check.

"Here he comes, here he comes. I guess this isn't someone you can lose on handmade legs."

The raincoat girl laughed as she continued her jump of death from rooftop to rooftop.

"But that's perfect."

Part 6

The situation was immediately set into motion.

A raincoat girl suddenly appeared and kicked away the pirate girl approaching Kamijou.

There was nothing she could do.

The bottom of the double raincoat fluttered so calmly it looked out of place.

The circle of girls crumbled all at once. Kamijou Touma was unable to get up, but the mass murderer girl crouched down nearby and lifted him up onto her shoulder like he was a bag of rice. She then looked around at the surrounding girls and laughed at the top of her lungs.

"Hah hah hah!! How are you doing, Onii-chan?"

Her focus shifted to the toy pocket watch hanging from her neck, but then she clicked her tongue a little.

“Oh, honestly. I had one arm blown off and the other one’s full... I can’t do my good luck charm like this.”

“What is the meaning of this, Salome?”

Kamisato Kakeru narrowed his eyes a little.

The naked raincoat sister looked at her dangerous brother and laughed.

“You know perfectly well everything I do is consistent, Onii-chan. Crazy people aren’t crazy because their actions don’t follow any rules. They’re crazy because they never break a set of rules that only they can understand.”

“...”

“I’ll do anything if it helps you. And that includes murder.”

Salome still held Kamijou who was utterly confused.

“But to put it another way, I’ll never kill if it won’t help you. I mean, what did Kamijou Touma ever do to Kamisato Kakeru? Is he your enemy for protecting the Magic Gods? Attacking people in a mistaken outburst of anger is just wrong. And it’s not like you have any proof that slaughtering all the Magic Gods will erase World Rejecter and return all those idiots around you to normal. That’s why I’ve gotta go for a more certain method. Killing Kamijou Touma and slaughtering the Magic Gods won’t necessarily return you to normal. So who can I kill to return Kamisato Kakeru to normal? There’s just one absolutely certain answer there, Onii-chan.”

“You can’t mean...”

The sister smiled evilly at her brother’s words.

“*I’ll kill every last one of those girls surrounding you. That’s gotta be the correct choice, don’tcha think?*”

Time froze.

Space solidified.

“It wasn’t Kamijou Touma or the Magic Gods that messed up Kamisato Kakeru. Hamazura, Misaka, and the #1. Also an Academy City airport and bank, I guess. I tried a few different people, but none of them felt right! I mean, the Kamijou Faction has done nothing wrong!! The source of it all is that goddamn stupid harem you call the Kamisato Faction. These idiots are in heat year-round and have even thrown out the term ‘self-

responsibility'. And the only reason you wield that inexplicable right hand called World Rejecter and get into these pointless fights is to turn them back into complete strangers, don'tcha think? You're not Zeus and Hera. Have you ever thought about the commoners who get caught in the middle of your ridiculous farce?"

"Stop it..."

"See? The source of it all has gotta be pretty clear now, right? Besides, even if the victims belong to a crazy category like 'Magic Gods', the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere shouldn't be dirtying his hands with killing, don'tcha think? And a snuff film to save everyone? Don't make me laugh, Onii-chan. What the hell is this disturbing orgy of violence with no guilt whatsoever? You're not a mass murderer. It might look like you're standing at the top, but you're really letting all those crazy people push you forward. What's this Kamisato Harem nonsense? Those girls are pretending to serve you while they're really possessing you. They're holding the strings to the foolish emperor decked out in his 'new clothes' and they can move his arms and legs exactly how they-..."

"*Stop it.*"

"*Not gonna.*"

The raincoat girl stuck out her tongue.

"Did you think you could hold back a mass murderer or two by force if you had the whole laughable Kamisato Faction together? Well, I'm sorry to say you chose the wrong opponent here. And doing it on camera was basically suicide."

"?"

"Silly Onii-chan. Didn't you know Kamijou Touma has a *really, really pain in the ass fan*?"

A moment later, a white tornado fell right in the middle of the circle formed by the Kamisato Faction.

Academy City's #1 had arrived.

There was no need to watch it all play out.

Salome laughed as she left with Kamijou Touma over the shoulder of her one remaining arm.

"Ah ha ha ha!! Hah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, that worked almost too well! My sides hurt!! I can't stop crying. The dams of tear ducts across the nation have burst! My sides... Heh heh. Oh, I can't stand it. Nooo☆ This is gonna destroy my sides!!"

“Salome...!!”

“Hee hee. The role of strategist doesn’t suit you. If you’re gonna play the normal high school boy, then it’s gotta suit you better to go with adlibs and grinding your teeth in anger afterwards. Now farewell, Onii-chan. Adieu. Peh heh heh. Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!!”

Kamisato Kakeru tried running after her, but he was swallowed up by the white storm.

Meanwhile, Kamijou Touma was about as confused as could be.

“Wait a minute! Please explain...well, all of this! Why are you naked? Why do you only have one arm? You aren’t bleeding. And since you’re acting like his sister, does that mean you’re Salome? What is all this about you being a mass murderer? And why are you naked!?”

“You ask about the nudity twice? Does that bother you the most, Adolescent-chan? But this is my battle body, so I omitted the organs needed for *that kind of thing*.”

The raincoat girl sounded annoyed as she jumped up to the roof of a three or four story building.

“Don’t let this sibling fight fool you. I’ll always be my brother’s ally. I’m not like those dubious hangers-on of his, so I’m not about to fall in love with someone after running into them when turning a corner. My chastity is more important than the entire planet, so make no mistake there.”

“...”

“You’ve been running around with my brother, so you’ve gotta understand what I’ve been doing. I was poking at the Kamijou Faction to throw them into disarray. Once they know simply being an acquaintance of yours gets them attacked, the foundation supporting you would crumble. So really, it didn’t matter whether I actually killed them or not. In fact, slaughtering every last one wouldn’t spread fear quite as efficiently, so I needed to spare someone who could get the word out. It’s a lot like a riot started by a baseless rumor, don’tcha think? Just like with zombie computers or roach-killing bait, it has to be taken back to the inner network to infect all of them. My goal was to create people who would spread fear like that.”

“I don’t know all the details, but that still means you’re my enemy and the one attacking my friends, doesn’t it? Then why would you save me!? No, wait. Are you really saving me? You aren’t just taking me back to your lair, are you!?”

“Not to worry. If I was gonna kill you, I already would have.”

Salome jumped from building to building.

“I truly am crazy. I was a mass murderer before my brother ended up ‘like that’. It was only recently that I threw away my body with my Internal Offering, but that isn’t the point. At the core, I’ve been a monster for much longer.”

“...?”

“But regardless, a crazy person will end up thinking crazy things. Namely, that I want to help my one and only brother who’s been messed up by the Magic Gods or whatever. And I don’t think those lukewarm horny girls surrounding him are the way to do that. What I need is you, since you’re boiling at precisely 100 degrees. If you can blow away that goddamn stupid harem boy, he’s gotta return to normal, right? It’s because those sluts who can only say ‘yes’ and ‘of course’ are pampering him that he’s got a screw loose while pretending he’s still sane, don’tcha think? And you’ve got the perfect fist for this. ...That thing’s supposed to destroy illusions, right? That giant moron is high on himself and his embarrassingly shallow ‘ultimate harem’ of his, so give him a nice painful taste of reality.”

“Please spare me... With the slaughter of the Magic Gods, the secrets of the world, and the mystery of my right hand, I’m overwhelmed by so many questions as I approach some kind of turning point in my life, so do you really have to open the lid and shove me in between a crazy brother and sister too!?”

“Hah hah! That’s generally what happens when you run across a crazy person, don’tcha think? They say it’s just a stroke of bad luck, don’t they!?”

Kamijou seriously wanted to go to bed and refuse to deal with any of this, but that was not an option here.

No matter their reasons for using it, that power was real.

They were still a threat.

He thought about the idea of a normal high school boy once more. Anyone would be afraid if someone like that had the power to change the world. They would chaotically and recklessly wield that power. They would be no different from a natural disaster.

“Who is...?”

“Hm?”

“Who is Kamisato Kakeru to you?”

Kamijou Touma sounded almost casual as he asked the question from her shoulder.

The effect was (for some reason) instantaneous.

“Bfh!?”

Raincoat Mass Murderer Salome spat out the contents of her mouth while jumping between buildings and she lost balance in midair. She somehow managed to avoid falling to the surface, but she did face plant on a square rooftop. She naturally let go of Kamijou while rolling around.

The plastic hood of her raincoat fell away from her head and she shouted at him with the tip of her nose red.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why would you ask that so bluntly!? You’ve gotta be stupid! I’m his sister! Not blood related, but his sister! How can you look me in the eye and say that!? Is this a hill in the setting sun? Just how difficult an adolescent life have you had!?”

“B-before that, can I have time to writhe around in pain too?”

Kamijou was covered in scrapes, but he finally managed to get up.

“Oh, I thought you had your hair wrapped around on the sides, but those were twintails?”

“Eh? Y-yes. Dammit. Did they come undone from the impact?”

“You’re actually pretty cute with that off your head.”

“You don’t have to point out every little thing! The Kamijou Faction is surprisingly frightening. You’re not my brother!”

Salome tried to quickly put her hood back up, but the twintails seemed to get in the way. She must have decided wrapping her hair back up with just the one hand would take too long because she finally gave up and let go of the hood.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Wh-what is it now?”

“Is that pocket watch hanging from your neck something you’ve always worn since Kamisato bought it for you when you were little? And do you also have a serious-grade full-spec nyan-nyan body you polish up every night for your ‘Onii-chan’, you crazy sister?”

“What is with you!? Honestly!!”

The mass murderer was flailing around now.

She used her one arm to grab the pocket watch and hunkered down as if to protect it from everything in the world.

“I’m not going to take it, so don’t worry.”

“Th-that isn’t the issue!”

She was still blushing, but she must have been mad that he had taken control of the conversation and was looking down on her. The (naked) raincoat girl heavily crossed her legs and intentionally winked.

“You wanted to know what kind of person Kamisato Kakeru is, right? You can ask if you want, but who knows who’s chasing after us. Do you still have the guts to sit around chatting?”

“I barely know anything about him, so anything you could tell me would be a plus.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Salome tried to cross her arms but then realized she only had the one.

She sighed before continuing.

“He once prayed for me by folding origami cranes.”

“?”

“He taught me how to ride a bike. And how to use chopsticks. Maybe he taught me how to hold a pencil too, but I forget. We bathed together when we were little. He held my hand when we went to school. He helped me with my homework and he made sure I had everything packed before we went on trips. I think he gave me some advice when I got my first love letter from someone I didn’t particularly like.”

At that point, she grabbed the pocket watch hanging from her neck by a thick thread.

It was a cheap toy mostly made from plastic.

But that meant its manufacturer would no longer be supporting it. If she brought it to a watch shop, they would just tell her to buy a new one. The fact that it was still running meant she had treated it with care.

“And as you guessed, he bought this for me. I was always late for everything, so he chose to forgo some candy and spent his own allowance on it. Funny, isn’t it? There really was someone who tried to teach a hopeless mass murderer something as simple as how to be on time.”

Kamijou had wanted an image of the monster known as Kamisato Kakeru.

This answer seemed useless for that, but he was wrong.

“When you get down to it, there’s nothing special about him. You can even say that’s why I fell for him. Normality can really get to you. Especially for a mass murderer like me.”

“Could you make this a little simpler?”

“Hmm, I’ll try... For example, greeting the people you meet on the way to school is normal, right?”

“And?”

“What if that person you met was a bank robber? Would it be normal to smile and greet them?”

“...”

“That’s what I mean. Normality doesn’t always lead to never-ending and unconditional compassion and benevolence. I chose the path of a mass murderer, so anything that happens to me has gotta be my just deserts. But even so, something that *isn’t* special really gets to me.”

Kamijou realized Salome had never mentioned anything about Kamisato’s parents.

Nor had Kamisato Kakeru.

That monster had said he started off as the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere. He had said it again and again. That meant he had to have been supported by the kind of normal mother and father that one could find anywhere, but what had been their “normal” reaction to Kamisato and Salome?

Had they accepted them?

Or had they not?

“I think they did submit a missing person report. But neither our parents nor the police seriously tried to find me. After all, I was still showing up at school now and then, even after running away from home. For the adults, it was best if they were trying to find me but never actually did. If I was missing and they had no idea what I was doing, then the parents couldn’t be blamed as the ones holding the reins. And if I was under a different jurisdiction, the police could escape responsibility for not protecting the peace. They had no intention of doing a serious investigation and arresting me. But that’s just how society works when it runs on a demerit system. If the police arrested me alone and discovered there had been one or two hundred more cases in their jurisdiction, who could say how many of them would be fired. They were afraid of people asking why they hadn’t noticed sooner and how they could let themselves be manipulated by a child like that. It had reached the point where arresting me would actually make things worse for them.”

“Are you serious...? And Kamisato has the nerve to call himself a normal high school boy?”

“Hah hah! No, a normal family will reject a mass murderer. Of course, with me it was generally groups. Hence ‘mass’ murderer. I always attacked hopeless cults with end-times philosophies or divers carrying small plastic packages from the sea at night, so the higher ups in the police must’ve been in complete chaos. They probably over-optimistically hoped they could control me and force onto me all the dirty work that the public security and foreign affairs divisions didn’t want to deal with, don’tcha think? Just like how a hunter isn’t allowed to shoot someone with their rifle, but they can still press that gun against someone’s back, guide them into the jungle, and let an un-prosecutable wild animal chow down on them. ...I didn’t really care how I was treated or what my position was. I mean, I don’t want to attack defenseless commoners. *It’s too boring*. When you’ve got a nice shiny rifle in your hands, it’s just rude to turn your back on the forest and aim for the side of a cow happily eating grass on a farm. That’s animal abuse and it’s pointless. Hunting isn’t the same as being a predator, don’tcha think? You aren’t fulfilling your natural role and targeting your prey. It’s the opposite. You’re using your intelligence and tools to challenge something higher up on the food chain. It’s the prey overturning the pyramid and killing the predator. That’s why it provides such a thrilling tension and why the kill has value as a trophy. That’s why hunting is a game that only humans can play.”

It was a hopeless conversation.

Due to its scale, its presence seemed to overturn good and evil.

No, it had a powerful influence provided by the truth contained within.

“And he was the only one. While everyone else was glancing my way, he looked straight at me and spoke to me. Although I got sick of him scolding me again and again and again that killing is wrong.”

Which one of them was normal and average?

Were their parents normal for rejecting a mass murderer? Or was Kamisato average for facing her nonetheless?

“So I, um, well, pretty seriously look up to my brother. Oh, b-but don’t tell him! If you do, I really will kill you!!”

“I won’t tell him. And how can you possibly look so friendly? My brain isn’t adding a filter since you’re a girl, is it?”

“You’ve gotta promise me you won’t... Oh, what am I even saying anymore? But it would feel wrong to stop after coming this far. Well, anyway, if he was normal, he would have abandoned a monster like me long ago. He would have run off during the night with our parents or he would have gotten sick of looking after me and killed me. But he didn’t do that. Not even I know if I would have been able to stick with him to the end if our roles were reversed. That’s why I look up to him. ...Or I did until that goddamn idiot got that right hand.”

That right hand.

World Rejecter.

“So do you think the same thing?”

“Hm?”

“Do you think all those people have gathered around him because he has that special right hand?”

There was definitely something wrong with Salome.

But despite that...no, because of it, the rest of the Kamisato Faction seemed somehow off. Asking the opinion of a girl known as a mass murderer was ridiculous, but he felt like there was something there that was only visible to someone like her whose gears were out of place.

If that mass murderer immediately answered “yes”, even Kamijou would have doubted himself.

Was that right hand really the whole of it?

Were those girls nothing more than World Rejecter?

Did it have nothing to do with Kamisato Kakeru’s personality?

“What do you think?”

But Salome dodged the issue with a question of her own.

“I do think that right hand, *including that aspect*, is Kamisato Kakeru’s curse and that’s why someone needs to destroy it eventually.”

It was not a clear yes or a clear no.

Even that twintails girl who was feared as a mass murderer may have wanted to avoid saying anything for certain here. Putting it to words might make it a reality, so she was stopped by an occult chill. Kamijou and Kamisato were enemies, but Salome was different. She had to stay with him forever, even if certain things proved to be the case.

“I’ve cooled down. Both physically and mentally.” The raincoat girl got to her feet. “We should probably end this here. Wasting any more time has gotta be dangerous. We can finish our chat when we reach our destination, Kamijou-chan.”

“Hey, wait! Wah!?”

They did not have time to argue.

Salome immediately grabbed Kamijou and held him rice bag style.

She took another running start and leaped.

She casually hopped from building to building.

“So what are you planning to do about Kamisato Kakeru? In fact, where are we headed!?”

“It doesn’t matter where. It just has to be somewhere with the ‘numbers’ I need to rival that goddamn stupid harem called the Kamisato Faction.”

“Numbers? Rival?”

“Oh, c’mon. My brother’s used the mysterious powers of his good looks to gather that suspicious fighting force. Whether they’re gonna attack someone or protect him, they’ve gotta have all their cards in one place. Otherwise, they’ll all melt away.”

“Please wait a moment. Are you going to get more people involved in this!? In fact, we need to keep an eye on Kamisato now that he’s making his move! Who knows when he’ll attack Index and Othinus in my dorm! You’ve gotta be kidding me. If he’s gonna do this, why can’t he only target me!?”

“You’re dyed pretty deep yourself if you don’t even hesitate to offer yourself up like that. This isn’t my Internal Offering we’re talking about. But no matter where he starts this, it’s gotta be best to crush him sooner rather than later. So will you follow my plan for now?”

Salome sounded exasperated as she jumped from building to building.

Kamijou gradually realized this was the route to school.

“But make no mistake. Offering yourself up won’t save the others. There’s no distinction between home and away. We’re talking about that brother of mine, so there’s no safe zone. I wonder just how far the invisible contamination has spread. The setup might already be complete, so things might be heading to the finale.”

“?”

He did not have time to wait for an answer.

With Kamijou Touma over her shoulder, the raincoat girl took an extra long leap toward the school building’s roof.

Part 7

This might be sudden, but I think anyone would be shocked if a mass murderer dropped down onto the rooftop during lunch.

Especially if she was a girl wearing only raincoats over her dazzling bare skin that had swimsuit tan lines, if she was acted perfectly fine despite having an arm torn off, and if she was carrying a teenage boy over one shoulder like a bag of rice.

Thus...

“Hi, coming through. It’s just a suspicious person breaking into your school, so don’t worry. But stay away, cause I’m pretty dangerous.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!? M-M-Mie-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!”

The palm-sized student council president known as the Jumpy Bunny was just about to open her lunchbox, so she hopped straight up while still in her seated position.

The mass murderer naturally did not care and casually tossed Kamijou aside.

The modern girl in a middle school uniform widened her eyes next to the president. Her lunchbox had an identical design, so it must have been true that Akikawa Mie was providing food for the Jumpy Bunny. And since they were eating together, this must have been a “bring-your-lunch day” for the middle school.

“Eh? Eh? Wait...what...?”

“You don’t have to get involved in anything like this, Mie-chan! I-I need to demonstrate my dignity as the student council president... I-I’ll give you my octopus wiener, so please spare Mie-chan!!”

“Well, if you’re offering.”

The raincoat mass murderer grabbed the offered item from the upside-down lunchbox lid and tossed it into her mouth. She showed no interest in the palm-sized president as she licked her fingertips and toyed with one of her silver twintails that was still exposed. She seemed unable to relax with them out like that.

However, the gazes of the president and modern middle school girl were painful.

But not for Salome, the one-armed naked raincoat mass murder. It pained Kamijou to be thought of as “with” her.

“Anyway, I’m going to fix my hair and find anything I can use as a weapon. I used up everything in my sports bag back with the #1, so I’ve gotta get some material to keep my chain going.”

“…”

“What’s the matter? Are you worried? I’ll admit it isn’t every day that a dangerous mass murderer wanders around school searching for knives, but you don’t have to worry this time. I’m on your side, Kamijou Touma. As long as you’ll continue being a ‘proper enemy’ for Kamisato Kakeru, that is.”

She stopped speaking there.

But then she glanced over at her torn-off arm as if she had just remembered it.

“No, I guess my arm would come first. I can’t exactly fix my hair without my dominant arm, can I? There’s gotta be an art room here. Do they have all the standard paste products like putty and plaster?”

“Your body’s made out of that?”

“No, but I need it to make the model. Then I add in some chemicals. I’m not an electronic cyborg, so I use chemical reactions instead. I guess I’ll have to start working on a suspicious recipe in the cooking classroom.”

“Again, your body’s made out of stuff like that!? We’re not talking about a summer project here!!”

“Honestly, everything’s so cutting-edge here I’m worried it won’t agree with me.”

Salome laughed and waved her remaining arm.

The true threat of Salome may not have been her extraordinary athletic ability or the strategic ability needed to escape the entire Kamisato Faction. It was her ability to conveniently repair herself with any materials she came across.

Then her tone grew more serious.

“Kamijou Touma. While I’m getting everything ready, you talk to everyone you know here and see if any of them are acting oddly.”

“?”

“Not all attacks are made by harming your opponent in a visible way. Especially when it comes to that goddamn stupid brother of mine. Just check over everyone. It couldn’t hurt, right? And if you find your normal class, your normal club, your normal committee, and your normal part-time job...well, that’s for the best, don’tcha think? That’s what I’m

hoping for. But...I think the odds are about 50/50. There's gotta be about a 50% chance of rain."

Salome seemed to be sniffing something as she spoke.

Kamijou could not hope to guess what that crazy girl's nose had picked up.

Regardless, the raincoat mass murderer said one final thing.

"I recognize this cloyingly sweet sense of bottomless candy. It's just like that goddamn stupid Kamisato harem."

Between the Lines 3

What image comes to mind when people hear the term laboratory? Perhaps a storage center for suspicious bacteria hidden deep in the mountains. Perhaps a development base for new fighter craft built in the middle of the desert. Or perhaps a deep sea experiment facility disguised as an offshore oil platform or a zero-g testing facility built into a space station module.

A specialized research facility might sound like something needlessly large that could never be paid for with personal funds. And it was true that not even an entire university would be enough for an almighty all-in-one laboratory that allowed for research in every field imaginable.

But on the other hand, a laboratory could be made quite compact if it only had the absolute essentials.

For example, a metalworking lab that created firearms, a biological management lab that cultivated viruses capable of wiping out a city of a million in under 24 hours, or a pharmaceutical lab that created synthetic drugs that could become an unlimited source of funds if used correctly. If one abandoned the scholarly idea of infinite possibilities and focused on one clear "goal", their laboratory could fit inside a port container.

Kihara Yuiitsu, a woman in a cheap suit and a lab coat, arrived in Academy City's District 17.

The district supported Academy City's manufacturing industry infrastructure and was almost entirely made up of unmanned factories, but Yuiitsu was not interested in the factories themselves.

Containers were piled up in an abandoned factory that was no longer in use. There were blank spaces everywhere like the result of a poor attempt at a puzzle game. A black luxury

car sat inside a space the size of a basketball court. It was incredibly long like a dachshund that had taken a wrong turn somewhere along its evolutionary history.

Its development codename was Griffon Driver.

It was a bulletproof vehicle for VIPs originally developed for the twelve members of the Board of Directors for use during World War III. It used a policy of active defense (i.e. remaining on the move at all times so no one would know where they were). From a distance, it looked just like a limousine parked in front of a casino, but as Yuiitsu approached, it became clear that it was over two meters tall and over twenty-five meters long. Yuiitsu could step through the door while standing. The body was made of composite armor, the bulletproof glass was more than fifty centimeters thick, and the door rivaled a bank vault with its eight rods and vacuum lock. Rather than air, the tires contained sponge in case of a hit from a sniper rifle or anti-tank mine and to prevent it from rendering itself useless by blowing the tires under its own weight.

There were several of these vehicles.

These polished luxury vehicles lined up side-by-side were Kihara Yuiitsu's fortress.

"Hello, Ms. Yuiitsu."

A young male voice spoke over the radio.

Then a further flood of voices reached her.

"Hello!"

"Hi, Yuiitsu-san."

"Keep up the good work."

Despite all the greetings, no one stepped out of the driver's seats. Yuiitsu did not bother pulling out her radio and simply waved while looking to the front of each vehicle. They asked no questions about their boss or the rear of the vehicles. The windows were all tinted and there was a thick barrier between the driver's seat and the rear area, so they could see nothing. That was a basic courtesy in this business.

(Although it would probably cause a blood vessel to burst in their heads and give them a brain hemorrhage if they knew a P4 level biological weapon was being cultivated in the back of the vehicles they're driving around the city all day.)

She walked toward one of the black vehicles and grabbed the knob to the back door. Several forms of biometric authentication were run and the door opened surprisingly easily.

The inside was entirely different.

A bluish infrared light illuminated the cold material that resembled silver stainless steel. Kihara Yuiitsu stripped off all of her clothes in a small space, sterilized her entire body in a complete decontamination room smaller than a phone booth, and put on a thick protective suit before opening the door to the main area.

It resembled the plant factories that were popular lately. Something like water tanks with no water inside were lined up on metal racks. The small digital counters on the glass surface were apparently used to manage the temperature and humidity. But unlike a tropical fish tank, there were two round holes in the sides of the tanks with thick rubber plastic gloves attached on the inside. In other words, they were set up so work could be done inside a completely sealed environment.

Each tank had about ten glass Petri dishes inside and the tanks were divided into multiple levels on the metal racks covering the left and right walls.

Kihara Yuiitsu snapped her fingers to activate the room's recording functions and reported on her progress as if speaking to herself.

"Discard #17-25, discard #40-60, discard #130-156. Make #1, 9, and 30 the top candidates. Make #5, 6, 70, and 99 the secondary candidates."

She did not bother observing each and every Petri dish under a microscope.

The samples to be discarded would be instantly neutralized by frying them with powerful ultraviolet and electron beams.

"Based on the traces left on the Anti-Art Attachment that was the foundation of Sensei's combat ability, we can estimate Kamisato Kakeru's power to be an extremely sharp cutting power that provides complete destruction without crushing the material along the slice. He should have been able to destroy Sensei's physical body as well as his weapon, but it is unknown why he did not. We can abandon the idea of some uncertain idea of good sense and assume there is some kind of condition needed to activate the power."

She used the microscope to view the remaining Petri dishes, especially the ones labeled a top candidate.

"That condition is unknown, but based on the traces on the armor, Kamisato Kakeru seems to be focused on his right hand. Some of the marks even resemble a hand print. I can't think of any defense greater than that armor, so stopping an attack from him would be nearly impossible. Thus, a long-term battle would be unrealistic."

She never directly touched it.

Utterly separated by cold glass and thick plastic, she used a fine dropper to add in chemicals by the nanogram as she looked after the cultivations.

“Kamisato Kakeru’s blood and tissue fragments were found on Sensei’s fangs. That means he allowed Sensei to get close, so he either lacks a means of attacking at long range or the environment prevented him from doing so.”

She did not add the same chemicals to any two Petri dishes labeled as top candidates.

They were all different.

She only needed one of them to fulfill her hypothesis.

“This leads to the conclusion that Kamisato Kakeru’s strange power uses some method based on his physical body to aim at a mid- or close-range target. Whether it can be defended against or dodged is unknown, so it should be assumed the activation of his power means death.”

She spoke quietly as she stared at something that could continue wriggling even in the coldest weather.

“In other words...”

She breathed in and out.

And she uttered the decisive words.

“The most effective attack method for Kamisato Kakeru is to ****** his ******** with ******* and *******.”

A sticky sound burst out.

Something had wrapped around the tip of the fine dropper Yuiitsu was using. Something black was sticking out of the Petri dish. It also contained the colorful patterns of a tropical frog or lizard.

She pulled on the fine dropper a few times, stared at the uncooperative sample with a smile, and then laughed.

She said one last thing as she laughed.

“Isn’t that right, Shoggoth-chan?”

CHAPTER 4

Despair, or an Objective Revealed.

Artificial_Disaster.

Part 1

Akikawa Mie's head was full of questions.

As usual, she had made a lunch for her old friend, the student council president, and the two of them had been eating their lunches on the rooftop. A suspicious person had jumped over from a nearby building, but that was not what had shocked her the most.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!? M-M-Mie-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!"

That part was fine.

That extremely small upperclassman always said something like that when she panicked.

"You don't have to get involved in anything like this, Mie-chan! I-I need to demonstrate my dignity as the student council president..."

That part was fine too.

She always had a habit of acting brave and trying to look big (especially in front of younger people like Akikawa Mie).

"I-I'll give you my octopus wiener, so please spare Mie-chan!!"

(That's it.)

Akikawa Mie hung her head a little when she realized what had sounded off.

The president had not been the one to make that lunch. Akikawa Mie had made it for her. Although about half of it was handmade by her mother and the other half was almost all microwaved frozen food. The president had always been so afraid of food additives that Akikawa Mie had felt she was overthinking things, but that meant she took issue with cheap processed meats like those octopus wieners.

But...

(Would she really say that?)

It went beyond liking and disliking.

Had she really been the type of person to give up on the lunch someone had made for her just because she felt a little threatened?

(Something about that feels...off. I'd expect her to say something like, "I won't let you touch the lunch that Mie-chan made for me.")

"Mie-chan?"

"..."

Akikawa Mie's shoulders jumped a little.

She must have lost control of her own mental state if she reacted like that to the small president who was within a meter of her.

The president had to be fairly panicked too.

If her mind had gone blank, it was hardly surprising she would do something that did not seem to follow her normal thought patterns.

"Heh...heh heh. Things are getting pretty exciting around here, but it's the student council's job to handle problems like this! So don't worry about this and go to your afternoon classes, Mie-chan."

"Eh? Oh, sure."

"I need to report this and share my information with everyone. If I act on my own and get attacked, no one will know what's going on! Now, then, Mie-chan! Thanks for the lunch! Vavroom!!"

Akikawa Mie sighed as she watched the small president leave the rooftop while providing her own sound effect.

She gathered the two empty lunchboxes and thought about heading to her classroom, but...

"Oh..."

The wind blew away the plastic cup used to hold the small serving of gratin. It flew over the fence, so there was nothing she could do. She followed it with her eyes and ended up

looking into the schoolyard behind the school, but she soon returned to the lunchboxes. She closed the lids and placed them in their cloth wrappers.

(She didn't mention her after-lunch tea, did she? But she always leaves a little in the water bottle.)

Akikawa Mie slowly stood up and glanced back behind the school again.

She could see the faculty parking lot and the trash dump shared by the middle and high school.

And the locked incinerator.

Part 2

Mass Murderer Salome had half-threatened Kamijou by telling him to make sure his class and the other people he knew were acting normally.

He was now walking down the still unfamiliar hallway of this new school.

Lunch break was coming to a close, so the struggle over the best lunches would be over and everyone would be free. He would normally have found a relaxed mood in the classroom, but today seemed different. By the time he was anywhere near the classroom, he could already hear the lively chatter from within.

Aogami Pierce and some other boys had formed a circle, so he spoke to his friend.

"What is it, Aogami? I haven't seen you all this excited since we were preparing for the Daihaseisai or the Ichihanaransai."

"Oh, perfect timing, Kami-yan. I was just thinking about contacting you."

"...By the way, how'd the roll call go?"

"Surprisingly well, actually. Everyone accepted it without a second thought."

"Thank goodness!!"

"Of course, that means no one noticed you were gone, even in this small classroom."

"How can I feel so glad and sad at the same time!?"

A short distance away, Fukiyose Seiri, the classmate with her trademark long black hair and forehead (and giant breasts), brought a hand to her forehead and shook her head.

"?"

"This isn't any time to worry about the girls, Kami-yan. We're the only ones that can understand the value of this big event."

"What is this about anyway?"

"It's a secret."

Aogami Pierce leaned forward with such delight that he clearly had no plans of keeping it a secret.

He continued with a smile.

"Did you know there's an incinerator behind the school that no one uses anymore?"

"What? ...No, wait. Don't tell me..."

"Sounds like you've heard. That's right! Sometimes the rash purchases of our youth only lead to disappointment yet have entered such a bizarre zone that just throwing them out would be too risky. So when we have an all-color magazine or when we have a life-size doll or extra-long pillow to be our late-night sparring partner, we can sneak in and burn them in the incinerator! I just wish they'd told us about this earlier. When in Rome do as the Romans do! We're thinking of taking up the torch of this new world's traditions and getting rid of some things we'd like to get rid of."

"....."

Kamijou was in a crisis thanks to the Kamisato faction and the monster known as Mass Murderer Salome who was apparently Kamisato's sister, but this peaceful place had remained entirely peaceful.

Except...

Hadn't President Jumpy Bunny said that was a bad idea?

"Hold on. Won't that lead to being charged with illegal entry and attempted arson? Won't it leave some embarrassing and easily searchable official records that make one wonder how that could possible happen?"

"Man, this really was a blind spot for me."

Aogami Pierce clasped his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair, and spoke entirely casually.

"*I'm glad that Kamisato Kakeru guy is a lot more mischievous than he looks.*"

Kamijou Touma's cheeks writhed oddly.

What was this?

Why had that boy's name come up here? Why here in this everyday classroom that had nothing to do with conflicts between science and magic, the desires of the Magic Gods, or the two right hands?

"Wait."

"What is it, Kami-yan?"

"Wait! Are you saying Kamisato suggested this!?"

He raised his voice without thinking, so Aogami Pierce and the rest of the class looked at him funny.

He was being treated as the odd one out for sensing danger there.

(What does that mean? Is he plotting something connected to that relatively harmless-looking incinerator? Illegal entry and attempted arson. Is he trying to get my classmates to make a bad decision and ruin their reputation?)

But this went beyond that.

Half a day before, Kamijou himself might have thought he was being overly suspicious, but now Kamisato Kakeru had deceived him and seriously tried to kill him. This was no time to trust anything that boy said.

There was something there.

Just as he had pretended to be on Kamijou's side to lure him out and gang up on him to kill him, there was something hidden in this unimportant-sounding turn of events.

An unpleasant sweat covered his brow, but Aogami Pierce and the other boys ignored him and continued their planning.

"The cameras and guards are set up more or less like this..."

"About the key to the incinerator's padlock, they have denture paste at the drugstore out front, so couldn't we create a mold with that and make a spare key?"

"Sneaking into the school at night is so exciting. It's like another world, but it's so close by."

Kamijou could not believe it.

The plan itself may have been similar to gathering at night to set off some fireworks, but they were planning actual crimes: illegal entry and attempted arson. No, if any sparks flew over and set the school on fire, the "attempted" part would vanish. Normally, they might discuss this kind of thing as a hypothetical or "what if", but they would never actually do it.

However, they had lost their self-control.

He had no real basis for it, but Kamijou felt he could not let them do this. He had a feeling this would end up going beyond simply burning some unwanted magazines in the incinerator.

"Hey," he said. "I really think this is a bad idea!"

"Why?"

"Because if something goes wrong, no one's going to help you out. If you're caught, Anti-Skill will be after you. It wouldn't be funny if you ended up suspended over something so stupid!!"

"And that's why we're planning it out so carefully. We won't get caught, so it'll all be fine."

"That's not the issue!"

"We've checked the security. The transformer is in an outside building, so we can switch it off before climbing the fence. And we can get past the padlock with a spare key. ...See, nothing to worry about."

Their plan was on the level of saying what they would do if terrorists attacked the school. They could picture it in their heads, but things were bound to go wrong once they actually tried it.

"Hold on. There's no way you can make a spare key! And what do you mean switch off the transformer!? You'll definitely set off some kind of alarm when you do that. This isn't going to work!!"

He desperately tried to stop them, but it was useless.

Aogami Pierce and the others only tilted their heads at a deeper angle. Even the girls who were not directly involved looked over at him in annoyance.

Then someone in the group made a comment.

"Quit ruining our fun, you killjoy."

Kamijou slowly – truly slowly – looked around the classroom.

Everything already looked the same as always. His usual classmates were chatting congenially and no one sent any definite looks of malice his way.

But someone had said it.

The deluge of voices lost all meaning. It simply surrounded him like a solid wall of noise.

(...Huh?)

He did not understand.

Unpleasant sweat pooled in his hands.

(Has the classroom...and have they...*always been so distant*?)

That was how they felt now.

And a moment later...

“Didn’t I tell you? This place smells just like the goddamn stupid Kamisato harem.”

Someone suddenly stepped rudely into the usual classroom.

It was a silver-haired girl with two raincoats worn directly over her bare skin that displayed the contrast of swimsuit tan lines. She had already re-set her hair, so it was curled around like disks or demon horns below the translucent hood. However she had done it, her torn-off arm was back to normal.

“He’s been busy in his short time here, don’tcha think? It’s like peering inside the mouth of a kid with a ton of cavities. It’s just creepy. Whether they can return to normal or not is honestly dependent on their pride.”

“H-hey, Kamijou? Is she a friend of-...”

A classmate hesitantly spoke up while looking at the true outsider that was Mass Murderer Salome, but he trailed off.

That was because Salome had grabbed his throat in a hand.

“Shut the hell up, you sugar-soaked bastard.”

“...Gah...!?”

“You let yourself be influenced so easily, threw out your ideas of good and evil, and abandoned all responsibility. You know who I hate most? The people who keep shouting ‘We won't ask for it. Until we win.’ to apply pressure to their neighbors, but suddenly claim they’d never wanted war in the first place the second the era changes. And that means you,

you rotten sugar-soaked bastards. Do you really understand what it means to piss of a mass murderer like me?"

"Gbh... Th-that wasn't...me...!"

"It wasn't me. In other words, you know who said it and were laughing along. Pathetic. Why are you even alive? Can you tell me one thing? Kamisato Kakeru was the one that made you like this, but did he ever ask you to live?"

"Hey!!"

When he saw his classmate's face turning red while dangling down from Salome's arm, Kamijou frantically grabbed that arm.

The raincoat girl shrugged and readily let go, but she put on an evil smile as she did.

"How benevolent of you. ...But make no mistake. No one's going to thank you for this. Do you really think their sugar-soaked brains are capable of thought on that level?"

Facing an outsider like Salome was easier for him, so Kamijou did not look back. He knew very well that his usual sunny life would only bring him pain now.

He exhaled and spoke.

"Let's head outside."

"Fine with me. I only just made my new arm and I haven't broken it in yet. If I keep seeing these creepy sugar-soaked bastards, I might just kill one of them."

He stepped out into the hallway with the raincoat girl and then he shouted at her.

"Why do you love being alone that much, you crazy girl!?"

"Remember this: the first step towards crazy is to stop caring what other people think of you. That's the kind of person I am." Salome laughed. "Anyway, you must've noticed how they've changed. I was getting excited thinking we could block the entrances and exits with desks and chairs to hole up in the school against the goddamn stupid Kamisato harem, but it looks like it won't be that simple."

"..."

"That cursed brother has already sown the seeds. Setting up barricades now will only get us stabbed in the back from within. The Kamisato Faction was bad enough on its own, but who knows how far the sugar-soaked contamination has spread."

“Kamisato predicted it would turn out like this?”

“Of course not. If he’d predicted my actions, he would’ve handled me a little better. He wouldn’t have even known I was coming to Academy City. Plus, he isn’t much for planning. That’s the problem with World Rejecter being so powerful. He can break through most things with brute force, so he doesn’t bother with the details.”

“In that case.” Kamijou slowly sighed. “Seeds he’d already sown for something else are blooming on their own now? Your rampage in Academy City, me working with him to lure you out, him deciding to kill me instead, and you getting in the way were all unexpected? Then what was his original plan?”

“Who knows. But his objective is always the same: revenge on the Magic Gods. More specifically, he was probably approaching you to get you to hand over Othinus, don’tcha think? Infecting the school might’ve been a way to bring down the Kamijou Faction and remove your defenses.”

“By having my friends sneak into the school at night and burn porn magazines and dolls in the unused incinerator?”

“I don’t know how to explain that either. But I do know he was going out of his way to destroy your circle of friends. There’s gotta be more to it than that. It might look like a silly event, but there’s gotta be something more there. ...Hey, Kamijou-chan. Have you heard of the Election Game? It’s a minor board game from Germany.”

“Hm? Kamisato mentioned that. He said it was basically a complex version of sugoroku where you try to become president using ridiculous methods you never could in reality.”

“That bastard was selling off stories about his little sister?” Salome clicked her tongue. “So what method do you think he liked to use?”

“How would I know?”

“He didn’t attack the other player or their supporters, but that doesn’t mean he was a paragon of fair play either. If the enemy ended up in the category of victim, their solidarity would only grow, so he thought it was best not to rely on simple violence.”

The corners of Mass Murderer Salome’s mouth twisted into a smile with her eyes hidden by the waterproof hood.

“So he preferred to goad them into action. He would give his enemy’s supporters a push forward, have them commit a crime, and place them in the category of criminal. That would destroy the enemy faction’s solidarity. That’s the kind of guy he is.”

Part 3

Akikawa Mie could not focus on her afternoon classes.

She must have been pressing down too hard because she kept breaking her mechanical pencil lead. She could not remember how many times she had swapped out the lead. The flow of time seemed so, so, so, so slow, but not even half of the material on the blackboard had made it into her mind. She had written it all into her notes, but she could not understand it even when reading it in her own handwriting. It was so bad that she had to frown and wonder if class had always been like this.

Once school was over, everything was dyed in shades of orange.

She breathed a deep sigh and finally stood up from her desk.

“I guess I should head home.”

She was worried about the president who she normally made a lunch for and otherwise looked after, but she decided she may have been making too much of this. After all, they had been eating lunch on the rooftop when a naked raincoat girl had intruded and tossed aside the boy she was carrying over her shoulder, so of course the president had panicked. Even if she had been thinking clearly enough to know she had to tell the student council and the teachers about the intruder (*which was the kind of student council work that Akikawa Mie would normally help with*), she may have had too much on her mind to think about her normal lunch routine.

After entering the hallway, Akikawa Mie casually glanced out the window.

Lunch was long over, so the pile of trash bags in the garbage dump out back was reaching its peak. Needless to say, that was thanks to the trash from the bread, meals, and drinks bought at the school store. The trashcans were normally full by the end of lunch, so the trash was usually taken out to the trash dump then rather than waiting for the afterschool cleanup.

But none of that mattered.

She was interested in the silhouette of a small girl she saw in the trash dump.

It was most likely the student council president.

“...”

Akikawa Mie placed her hands on the windowsill, stared at the trash dump through the glass, and nodded. She put on her leather shoes at the shoe lockers and then circled around back.

The president with her long black hair and large ribbon quickly noticed her.

She wiped the sweat from her brow with the upper arm of her sweater since the thick plastic gloves did not reach there, and she gave a carefree smile.

“Oh, if it isn’t Mie-chan. What brings you here? Was it your day to take out the-...no, I guess not.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Akikawa responded like normal.

Except...

“What are *you* doing here, Onee-chan?”

“Ah ha ha. I am the student council president, you know? Separating the trash can be pretty scary. Some kids throw out spray cans and broken utility knife blades, so a careless garbage man could get hurt.”

“True.”

Akikawa Mie thought that was a wonderful way of thinking.

The TV news sometimes mentioned garbage men who had a finger blown off, so she though it was truly amazing that this girl was checking on the garbage every day to prevent those accidents.

However...

“But Onee-chan, you weren’t separating the trash.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“You can see this area from the middle school hallway. I was watching for about half an hour, but you didn’t open a single trash bag.”

After seeing things momentarily stopped, Akikawa Mie had trusted in her sense that something was wrong.

And she had made her attack.

Half an hour was a lie. She had only watched for two minutes.

But the president took it at face value and a lag entered her smooth speech like the needle skipping on an old record.

“Oh, come on. Not even the student council president can check all this garbage by opening each and every bag. Most dangerous things like hairspray cans and utility knife blades are metal, right? That’s why I use a handheld metal detector to-...”

“Sure.” She did not let the girl finish. “But isn’t that useless? You said it yourself, Onee-chan, most dangerous things are metal.”

“What about it?”

“Most. That means you aren’t eliminating 100% of the danger. What about wooden skewers? Or anything plastic? Or a broken glass? Those can break through the bag and hurt the garbage man’s finger just as well. Why are you compromising there? If you were really using up your afterschool time out of concern for the garbage men, I think you would try to be as thorough as possible.”

“...”

“And if you are willing to let a garbage man get hurt due to your compromise, you wouldn’t even think about staying behind to work afterschool.”

In that case, why was the president here?

There were not too many benefits of visiting and hanging around the garbage dump. People normally did their best to stay away.

But wasn’t there another way of looking at it?

If everyone did their best to stay away, wouldn’t it be the best place to hide something?

And what if it was something that required stopping by periodically to check on it?

Akikawa Mie felt her heart pounding unbelievably hard.

It was even more out of control than during her adventure with the liquid diamond.

The “president” was not interested in the garbage dump. The garbage would make for poor camouflage since the garbage men would take it all away by the following day.

But there was something else there.

Something else stood out besides the large piles of trash. It was no longer used. It was a box of rusted metal. It was wrapped with thick chains and locked with a plain padlock.

“Hey, Onee-chan?”

“...What is it?”

“What is inside the inciner-...”

“*Mie-chan?*”

In that instant, Akikawa Mie did not just feel a chill run down her spine. She felt an impact that seemed to tear her spine right out.

The “president” had not actually done anything.

She had simply smiled in the setting sun.

And yet sweat was pouring down Akikawa Mie’s body. She suddenly realized they were alone in the deserted garbage dump. That meant no one was watching.

The “president” had mentioned the possibility of dangerous things mixed in with the trash. But what if they had been placed their intentionally rather than on accident? What if some bags full of blades or explosives were mixed in “just in case”? In fact, no obvious weapons were needed. The trash was piled up higher than they were tall. If the piles collapsed, she could be buried alive. And if that happened, who would suspect foul play? The “president” only needed to cover her face with her hands and tell everyone what had happened. She only had to say a student was playing in the garbage dump despite all the warnings not to and an unfortunate accident had occurred.

That was all she had to do.

That was all she would have to do.

“Hey, Mie-chan?”

“...”

The pressure of the “president’s” smile approached.

Akikawa Mie subconsciously took a step back from that smile.

“The incinerator is ‘dangerous’, so no touching it, okay? Even if it’s chained up and padlocked, you can still pull it open a few centimeters, which is enough room to get your finger caught. And with all that rust, there’s a danger of tetanus.”

It likely was a perfect smile.

Under normal circumstances, anyone would have been fooled by it.

Akikawa Mie even wondered if she was being too suspicious and overthinking this.

But then she gulped.

Who was it that had called sunset the “magic hour” in cinematography? Akikawa Mie had no way of knowing since she had little knowledge about film, but she still received the benefit if its effects.

The setting sun provided a unique shade of lighting and cast a deep, deep shadow over the features of that face.

That may have been why she sensed something tremendously wrong, like there was something tugging in on that skin from below the carefree smile.

“Mie-chan.”

An “ah” escaped her throat.

It was not even a voice.

“Miiie-chan, can you promise me?”

“...!!!???”

There was nothing she could do.

Once her fear reached its limit, Akikawa Mie’s rational mind burst. She turned around and began running. She tried to get as far away as possible from that garbage dump, that incinerator, and that figure she had “seen” in that familiar person.

She could not stand it.

She could not stand it, she could not stand it, she could not stand it!!

She could not stand her helplessness. She could not stand her inability to tear away the chains and padlock on that incinerator. She could not stand that her intent on investigating that rusted box had been broken just from someone staring at her.

(Who is that?)

Once she asked the question in her heart, further questions erupted out.

Someone was pretending to be the president. Someone had slipped into the school. Then where was the real one? Where was the cute small animal of a president who feared food additives but also feared food poisoning?

A vision rapidly grew inside her head.

It was of the chained and locked incinerator that could contain anything.

(Who is that!?)

An innocent voice seemed to slam into her back.

“Mie-chaaaan, I’m looking forward to my lunch tomorrow.”

(Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!)

Something sparked inside her mind.

She ran and ran and ran and ran and ran and ran and ran and ran.

The next thing she knew, she had left the school grounds and was gasping for breath as she leaned up against a wind turbine.

The contents of her stomach almost joined the heavy breaths leaving her mouth, but she desperately held back the urge to vomit while painfully aware of her unpleasantly sweat-soaked body.

Meanwhile, she muttered to herself.

She moved her lips and released the words into the world instead of keeping them locked in her heart.

“Who is that?”

She had to reveal that source of it all.

She had to retrieve her normal life.

But as a normal middle school girl, she was aware just how normal she was. If she stood up to such a great distortion on her own, she knew all too well she would only become the next poor victim.

What did helping the student council matter?

What good was an adventure with a liquid diamond worth six trillion yen?

Her past activities may have been enough to erase the awkward silence in an elevator, but they were not a weapon that could help her escape this crisis. She had nothing with a hidden abnormal side to it.

But then who did?

Was there anyone nearby who would listen to her and who she could rely on?

The classmates and friends inside her cellphone’s address book were not going to help. What about Anti-Skill or Judgment? They were too normal. In fact, she could not imagine how she could explain the problem in her mind such that they could understand. What

about the student council? She respected them, but they did not seem like the type to leave the usual rails, run through the night, and fight the darkness.

In the end, only two candidates came to mind.

Akikawa Mie herself could not explain how she had settled on them.

But she had seen something different in them. They seemed like they were moving freely in a place removed from the usual rails.

If she was going to trust her instincts, then there were two people she could discuss this with.

It had to be either Kamijou Touma or Kamisato Kakeru.

Part 4

The night wore on.

"This is bad. What's bad, you ask? I haven't made Index and Othinus any dinner. Well, I did learn my lesson after last time and had a few cup noodles ready, but I'm a little afraid Othinus will fall into the container."

Aogami Pierce and Kamijou's other classmates were acting based on knowledge provided by Kamisato Kakeru. They were going to sneak into the school late at night and use an unused incinerator to burn up pinup magazines, life-size dolls, and body pillow covers.

And of course, Kamijou seriously doubted Kamisato would have them do that on a whim. It may have looked like a silly little event, but what if there was some hidden malice behind it? Salome, Kamisato's sister, had warned him about that, so he was keeping an eye on the school that night.

However...

"Why do I have to freeze my butt off in the bushes by the school gate waiting for a bunch of guys!? Isn't there another way? I mean, there's a family restaurant and café not far from here!"

"Yeah, but I'm only wearing these raincoats. Even if my battle mode lacks *that sort of thing*, I'd still get reported to the authorities the instant I stepped in the door, don'tcha think?"

"If you know it's a problem, then wear some clothes!!"

“I can’t do that thanks to this body.”

“And based on the way you talk about it, I’m guessing you really do have a spare body besides that battle one. Is it for your Onii-chan?”

“Ahem. Quit being so nosy. That’s none of your business, don’tcha think?”

After that, Salome reached into the nearby shadows as if pulling out a souvenir.

“More importantly, we’ve got a problem.”

“Bh!?”

At some point, Salome had grabbed an unfamiliar middle school girl by the back of the neck. The girl looked nervous and quite blue.

“Wait a second! Who is that girl!?”

“Akikawa! Akikawa Mie!! You still haven’t learned my name!?”

“And why do you have Whatever-Her-Name-Is with you!? Don’t just kidnap people like you’re grabbing the finished version of the dish at the end of a cooking show!!”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m keeping her safe. She seems to have some business with the school and she was hiding in the bushes just like us.”

“Hm?”

Kamijou looked back at the girl who was still in her uniform.

She almost – almost! – looked familiar.

“M-my name is...Akikawa Mie... D-do you really...really, really not remember me?”

“Who?”

“Oh, honestly!!”

The modern middle school girl furiously scratched at her head.

She must have realized she would make no progress if she stuck with her pride because she gave an explanation while seeming to bite through each individual word.

“Um! Is the, uh, *old priest* who saved me during the liquid diamond stuff doing well? I need to thank him!!”

“???”

Salome gave him an annoyed look, but Kamijou could only tilt his head. He puzzled over her question since he was pretty sure he did not know any priests.

“No, wait. Do you mean...the High Priest!? What the hell did he do while here in Academy City!? Isn’t he a priest? So why was he was he hitting on a middle school girl? Don’t tell me he was driving around in an Italian car with a bunch of gold necklaces on!! Wasn’t he supposed to be a Magic God who had mastered his field!?”

“Heh. Eh heh heh.”

“And even more baffling is why this modern middle school girl seems completely fine with it. ....How does a mummy priest end up so popular!? Are we entering the age of temple girls and Buddhist fangirls!?”

“I’m glad you’re here.... I couldn’t seem to find anyone to talk to about Onee-chan. To be honest, I was hoping to meet with Kamisato-san instead of you.”

“Kamisato...?”

“Sorry, but your counseling session will have to wait.” Raincoat Salome’s quiet voice urged them to silence. “Something’s started. I can see a few flashlight beams moving around. And that’s gotta be someone other than Anti-Skill. They’re wandering around instead of following a set patrol route.”

“So it’s them...”

“?”

Unsure what was going on, Akikawa Mie tilted her head.

And why had that girl been here all alone this late anyway?

“U-um, I thought Onee-chan...no, the high school student council president might not find me this late. That wouldn’t work if she monitors it at night too, though.”

“The president?”

Kamijou was confused by the mention of the Jumpy Bunny, but then Akikawa Mie asked a question of her own.

“Um, why are you two here?”

“It’s awful. My goddamn stupid brother got this guy’s classmates to sneak into the school at night to burn their porn magazines and stoic training dolls in the unused incinerator.

That's illegal entry and attempted arson on its own, but there's gotta be more to it than that. It all smells really fishy to me, but we're still not sure what exactly-..."

They heard the sound of several small twigs snapping.

Akikawa Mie had been so shocked she fell backwards and landed on her butt within the bushes.

She raised her voice while looking like someone floating with her butt sticking inside an inner tube.

"W-wait a second! The incinerator!? Is that true!?"

"What if it is?"

Mass Murderer Salome sounded puzzled and Akikawa Mie's lips started trembling.

"But...hold on. If that's true...but...you're kidding..."

"Again, what about it?"

"The Onee-chan walking around at school today isn't the real one. Someone else has taken her place! And the real one might be trapped inside that incinerator!!"

Kamijou and Salome exchanged a glance.

They wanted to write this off as a joke or a delusion, but they could not stop a chill from running down their spines.

"Hey, Kamijou-chan. You've been at this school a bit. Have you met this student council president? Do you think this might be accurate?"

"I have one question. Akikawa Mie...-chan was it? You make the president's lunches, right?"

"Oh, y-yes... I thought how she handled the lunch was a little odd too."

"Sorry, but that's not what I'm getting at." Kamijou cut her off. "What about other meals? Breakfast for example. Do you make anything for her then?"

"Um..." Akikawa Mie looked troubled. "She doesn't even eat breakfast. I keep telling her that's unhealthy, but she won't listen."

"...Oh."

That confirmed it.

Kamijou mussed up his bangs with a hand.

“I met that president this morning at the garbage dump. But she had a banana gelatin drink. She said she could drink it without getting her hands dirty.”

“I’ll tell you as many times as it takes, Onee-chan doesn’t eat breakfast.”

“In that case...” started Salome.

“That food wasn’t for her,” continued Kamijou. “Akikawa? If what you’re saying is true, then it was food for whatever she’s keeping in the incinerator.”

Replacing someone like that was no easy feat. The odds were good one of the girls from the Kamisato Faction had a hand in it.

And Kamisato, their leader, was manipulating Kamijou’s classmates into lighting that incinerator.

According to Salome, his sister, he had a certain way of playing the Election Game.

He would goad his enemy’s candidate into committing a crime and use the weight of that crime to tear apart their solidarity.

“Hey, Salome.”

“What?”

“If the real one really is inside the incinerator, do you think Aogami Pierce and the others could light it without noticing? Once they remove the padlock and chains and open it up, they’ll find a girl inside there. Surely they’d notice that! Right!?”

“I’m not so sure. The inside of a closed space like that has gotta be pitch black in this darkness. And would they really go to the trouble of shining their flashlights inside an incinerator that hasn’t been used? They’ll just dump all their magazines and pillow covers in, toss in some lit paper or something, and close it up, don’tcha think? And if this rumored president has her arms, legs, and mouth bound with duct tape, she won’t even be able to make any noise. And if she’s unconscious thanks to malnutrition and dehydration, they won’t have any kind of hint. ...More importantly, why would anyone think there’s a living person inside an incinerator that’s been locked up for what has to be over a decade now? With that presumption of safety in place, they’ll have no reason to check at all.”

“Goddammit!!”

Kamijou cursed and stood from behind the bushes.

He had no more reason to hide. Setting off an alarm would actually be a good thing now. He climbed over the fence and ran across the school grounds. Salome and Akikawa Mie followed.

This was odd.

Kamisato Kakeru was completely over the line this time.

He would go this far to tear apart the friendly group known as the Kamijou Faction? He would really have Aogami Pierce and Kamijou's other classmates unwittingly commit murder, place the blame of that crime on them, and use the weight of the crime to crush Kamijou's circle of friends? This did not seem like the same person who had worked to save the Birdway Sisters, even if it had been in a twisted fashion. Besides, President Jumpy Bunny had nothing to do with Kamijou. They belonged to different schools and they had been complete strangers until the day before.

Yet he did not even hesitate to have someone burn her alive?

"What the hell are you thinking, you dumbass!!!!!?"

This truly was the end.

Even if they were being manipulated by someone, these classmates' previous life would never return if they set someone ablaze with smiles on their faces. This would place things on a decisively different set of rails and smash Kamijou Touma's familiar world to pieces.

But...

"I was hoping you could give him a nice punch before it came to this." Salome sounded like she was cursing him. "That stupid harem boy! Did he completely lose his morals because everyone agrees with everything he says!? A world without anyone to say 'no' is a world without any chance to correct your actions! Why couldn't you figure that out, you pampered goddamn stupid Onii-chan!?"

They cut across the dark schoolyard in a full speed dash toward the back of the school. They needed to reach that garbage dump...no, the rusted incinerator. They could hear something heavy rattling in the darkness.

It was the chains keeping the incinerator closed.

They were already being removed.

(Make it...)

Then they heard a quiet sound that was likely a lighter lighting.

The familiar grinning faces of his classmates floated in the darkness as if they were lit by candles during a ritual of some mysterious cult.

One of them was Aogami Pierce.

“(Make iiiiiiiiiiit!!)

“Salomeee

It was more than just Kamijou Touma. Salome and Akikawa Mie also stared inside the diagonally sliced incinerator with looks of absolute confusion.

“Eh?”

“Was she...moved somewhere else afterwards?” muttered Akikawa Mie.

But Salome rejected the idea.

“No, it’s not that. If so, there’d be some trace, like a human scent. If our guess was correct, then your president would’ve been inside that cramped space for days on end, right? It would have to smell like sweat at least, don’tcha think?”

“Then...” Akikawa Mie looked confused. “What was all this? Was I wrong? Was Onee-chan really herself? Did her face only look so twisted in the setting sun because of my odd preconception?”

For the moment, they had kept the real president from being burned alive.

That was something at least.

But...

“Hey...”

Someone spoke up.

Kamijou Touma did not turn around.

That low, low voice was truly the tone of someone looking down on someone else.

“What is the matter with you people? Taking it this far is honestly kind of disturbing.”

Kamijou found he could not speak.

He forcibly broke free of the curse and moved his body. He finally turned around with all his might, but he only saw blank faces. They were splitting up into small groups. Their event had been ruined, so they felt nothing but disappointment.

Finally, Kamijou remembered something.

(It can’t be...)

He remembered what Salome had said.

Kamisato Kakeru excelled at goading his enemy candidate into committing a crime and using the weight of that crime to tear apart their solidarity.

(It can't be!!)

"H-hey, Aogami...!!"

He called toward that boy's back.

His friend stopped and slowly looked back.

"It's okay, Kami-yan."

There was no anger or disappointment on his face. He remained a friend.

But...

"*Even if things get a little awkward, I'll stick with you until things cool down.*"

There was pity.

And sympathy.

This was not a conversation between people who stood on equal footing. Aogami pierce knew that Kamijou Touma had "messed up". And with that in mind, he was reaching a hand out to Kamijou as if stepping down into loneliness from his position in the great heights.

Oh, how kind.

Oh, how cruel.

"..... ....."

There was no one left.

There was no one left around Kamijou Touma.

The spiky-haired boy simply stood there on his lonesome at the school late at night.

Kamisato Kakeru's circle had closed.

And it had smashed Kamijou Touma's to pieces.

"Ha."

No matter how cruel Kamisato Kakeru was, he should have realized that boy would not have a completely unrelated person burned alive. Kamisato had worked so hard for the

Birdway Sisters, so he would never use that sort of method. And if he had seen that, he should have suspected another trap beyond it.

“Ha ha.”

Kamijou did not know how long he had been standing there.

He did not even know if Salome and Akikawa Mie had said anything to him or simply waited in silence.

Finally, a new footstep shook his mind back into focus.

He slowly turned his head and saw “the kind of normal high school boy one can find anywhere” entering through the school’s back gate.

He was accompanied by black-haired Ellen in her lab coat and brown-haired Fox Girl Elza.

He spoke to Kamijou just like always.

“Hi, Kamijou Touma. You look a lot more worn out than when I saw you last.”

“You son of a biiii

She was close enough to tear out his windpipe with her teeth, so she did not even need her arm. The raincoat girl glared at the calm-faced high school boy.

“To be honest, you’ve really pissed me off this time. I might be the kind of crazy person that loves being called a mass murderer, but not even I can approve of this one. How did you end up like this? You’re supposed to be the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere! That’s why a crazy person like me looked up to you!! Tell me who told you it was okay to stray from the proper path like this!! You piece of shit!!!!!”

“Salome, I’m well aware your brain doesn’t work right, so can you shift down a few gears and help me understand what the problem is?”

“I’m saying I’m ready to just kill you here and be done with all this!! *I’m* saying that and I’m just a despicable crazy person who can’t even kill anyone cleanly!!”

“What a pain... I guess you never were going to get along with Kamijou Touma. Oh, right. There’s someone else here. Yes, you.”

“...”

“Could you tell me why my sister is so mad? I honestly can’t think of anything.”

Akikawa Mie should have been an outsider.

She should have known nothing about the antagonism between Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru.

But that comment seemed to rub her the wrong way and she too spoke up as if to challenge him.

“What you did was the absolute worst.”

“Perhaps so. Perhaps not.”

“So...whatever happened to Onee-chan...to the high school student council president!? Did you take her somewhere other than the incinerator or were you only focused on making us think she’d been kidnapped!? Who is the Onee-chan in this school right now!? Is she the real one or a fake!?”

“Hm? Hold on a second.”

Kamisato Kakeru frowned for the first time since he arrived.

“What is this about the high school student council president? It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

.....

This time...

This time Kamijou Touma truly gave up on understanding. He was floating in an entirely blank world.

“Yeah, right.” Salome was of course the one to speak instead. “Don’t play dumb. You used an indirect method to break Kamijou Touma’s core! You made it look like that president was trapped inside the incinerator and like his classmates were going to light it without knowing, so he had to stop them from becoming murderers. ...You made Kamijou Touma look like a fool in front of all of them!! You stole his position in the school, you goddamn stupid brother!! Do you not even respect him as your proper enemy!?”

“Again.”

Kamisato Kakeru took a step back for the first time since he arrived.

He held his palms out to get them to calm down.

“I don’t know anything about that. I didn’t do anything to the president. Proving it would be a lot like the Devil’s Proof, but I swear it’s true.”

“Then why? Why did you have Kamijou-san’s classmates use the incinerator so late at night? You had to have had a reason!”

“I wanted them to see our battle.” Kamisato readily gave the answer. “World Rejecter and Imagine Breaker. If they clash, I’ll win, but then something entirely unknown will burst from his severed arm. I wanted the people who know him well to see that. I thought one of them might know something about it, so I thought I might find a clue to the answer if I carefully observed their expressions and reactions.”

Salome and Akikawa Mie may not have understood, but Kamijou did.

Yes. Kamisato’s intent was to defeat Kamijou. And the fastest way to do that would be to find a way to finish him off using World Rejecter rather than coming up with some roundabout plan.

It was true Kamijou’s classmates might distance themselves from him after witnessing the secret of his arm, but it at least made more sense than the truly hopeless conclusion that had actually happened.

Or it seemed that way at least.

“How can we believe that?” muttered Akikawa Mie. “Then...then what was that Onee-chan? Was I really just mistaken? No, I refuse to believe that. It doesn’t make sense that she so forcefully tried to keep me from looking inside the empty incinerator!”

“That’s it.” Kamisato snapped his fingers. “At the very least, I didn’t touch the president. But it looks like you’re suspicious of her actions and appearance. And that made you suspect some kind of high-level replacement.”

“Yes. And in that case...”

“I will unconditionally accept everything you’re telling me as true, so I want you to unconditionally accept what I’m telling you as true. We won’t get anywhere otherwise.”

Kamisato Kakeru slowly exhaled.

“If the president really has been replaced by someone else and if neither of us knows who it could be...”

He listed off the premises.

Now that they thought about it, something about this had become twisted at some point.

Kamisato then asked the fundamental question.

“Then who exactly is pretending to be the president?”

There was an answer to his question.

It came as a sound.

It was a juicy sound like fruit being sliced.

“Wha-...?”

Even Kamisato Kakeru gasped.

It was right next to him.

It was close enough to cut him off from Ellen and Elza.

A small form stood there.

Whoever it was had long black hair and a large ribbon. It was the Jumpy Bunny.

Or someone pretending to be her.

“Ah!? When...did-...!?”

It happened so suddenly. Far too suddenly. Rather than approaching at high speed, it felt more like she had oozed up out of the landscape. Yes, just like a flounder beginning to move from the sandy ocean floor.

Kamisato Kakeru immediately moved back, but was that a good decision or not?

He should have thought more about the sound that had answered him before.

A moment later, it had been taken.

His right hand had been severed at the wrist and the president's doppelganger held it in her hands. That was World Rejecter.

It was the powerful and horrible right hand that had slain Magic Gods by the dozen.

And it had been taken so easily.

"Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Kamisato Kakeru screamed as rolled around with blood splattering from his wrist, but the small president was calm enough to lick off the blood that reached her cheek. She was not holding any kind of blade, but she had easily sliced through even the bone of Kamisato's right wrist.

Akikawa Mie shrieked more than screamed and collapsed backwards.

"Heh heh heh hehhhh."

The girl snapped her fingers.

The area around her right wrist seemed to shine like a glowing bracelet and then her own hand was severed. She seemed to have used some kind of wire, but the details were unclear. And despite losing her own hand, this unknown person maintained her joyous smile.

Except...

"Kamisato Kakeru's right hand was the biggest bottleneck."

Starting with the sliced wrist, the girl's silhouette peeled away, grew distorted, and fell apart. The figure standing there was no longer a girl in a school uniform.

"But if I was to take revenge, I wanted this right hand more than anything."

Instead, it was *a woman in a lab coat and cheap suit.*

Some kind of thin, thin thread shot from within her lab coat and forcibly attached Kamisato Kakeru's severed hand to her newly vacated wrist. The writhing thread moved on its own like a parasite. It was a rough action like sewing up the torn belly of a stuffed animal, but it must have used some kind of special technique because the woman immediately clenched and unclenched the hand.

"Heh heh heh! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Stitching by Sample Shoggoth confirmed. Beginning experiment of recognition control using the attenuated St. Germain virus. This will rewrite my brain as the owner of this right hand...as he owner of World Rejecter!! Yes, yes. Stealing your enemy's power and growing truly unstoppable is the epitome of romance! Isn't it, Sensei!!!???"

"What...?"

Kamijou Touma could not keep up.

He was just about ready to give up, so he simply asked.

"Who are you?"

"I am Kihara Yuiitsu."

There could not have been a logical reason to honestly answer him.

Especially as the person making an illegal attack.

Nevertheless, the woman in a lab coat and cheap suit did not hesitate to answer.

After all...

"I am the one who seeks romance on a level no one else can ever reach. You really just directly asked who I am? Pfh! Heh heh! Ah ha ha!! And why am I honestly answering you!? Romance, yes, this can only be romance!! And even if my real target is Kamisato Kakeru, you don't mind if I go on a bit of a detour, do you?"

The air began to move.

Ellen, Elza, and Salome were all on Kamisato's side. They were not about to sit idly by after his right hand had been severed and stolen and the person who had done it claimed they were going to use World Rejecter's power on him.

"Sensei would never say this. He would insist on not involving unrelated people in his revenge."

She knew that.

She knew that, and yet she continued.

“But being just like him would be too boring. I need to become something unique. *So let’s try doing the opposite!* Let’s choose the path Sensei never would have! Just killing the bastard who stole everything from me wouldn’t be enough. I need to steal everything I can from him, kill everything of his I can, and take away everything he holds dear! Now, that...*that* would be the perfect time to deliver the finishing blow!!!!!”

Between the Lines 4

Phase 1:

The Five Over OS – Model Case Mental Out is based on the personal conflict between Shokuhou Misaki and Mitsuari Ayu. Obtained a sample of its real-time military camouflage technology and magnetically controlled monitor.

A very close approach will be needed to determine the traits of Kamisato Kakeru’s World Rejecter.

This will be used to take the place of an arbitrary person at his school and perfectly take on their appearance.

♦

Phase 2:

Obtained a sample of the St. Germain virus used during the occupation of the high-rise building centered on Kanou Shinka. Successfully cultivated the pill-shaped sample in a Petri dish and attenuated it.

Even if I successfully sever Kamisato Kakeru’s right hand, the power inside might reject me. I must rearrange my own brain to trick its recognition. I will use the traits of the St. Germain virus for that overwriting.

♦

Phase 3:

Obtained a sample of the Sample Shoggoth that acted as the bottleneck in the clash between Kamijou and Kamisato concerning the Birdway Sisters. It is actually a variety of Academy City’s #2, Dark Matter, but it ignores that esper’s will and can be controlled by a third party. I will use it for the surgical requirements of severing and sewing on the hand while connecting all of the blood vessels and nerves.

♦

Using the above methods, she planned her revenge by stealing the right hand that made Kamisato Kakeru unique and wielding it as her own.

She had also picked up on Kamisato Kakeru's interpersonal relationships.

She of course wanted to physically approach him to gather information on World Rejecter. But infiltrating what was known as the Kamisato Faction was deemed too dangerous. Their unique sense of solidarity could not be obtained overnight.

Reports said he was making frequent visits to the student council.

If they had not been dyed in the colors of the Kamisato Faction, that would be the best place to interfere.

She did not need to hold back, so she targeted the president at the very top.

After acquiring the requisite personal information, she targeted Keshouin Asuka.

She wanted to avoid anyone noticing the switch while she was in contact with Kamisato Kakeru, so she had the real one stay at some far removed place. Until, that is, she had gathered the necessary data and everything was ready to make her attack.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek! I didn't like the sound of something turning up on this unplanned health inspection, but what do you mean I have a max rare SSR-level parasite that only one in seventy million people get?"

As a decoy, she gathered attention on the incinerator that was no longer in use.

If her cover was about to be blown before she had achieved her goal, she would shift suspicion there to buy time to either continue or retreat. It was like a lizard's tail. If anyone grew dangerous, she would make them suspect the incinerator as a test to see just how close to the truth they were concerning Keshouin Asuka.

"B-but they apparently give you a huge monetary reward if you volunteer for the clinical trial of their new drug. Once this is over, I can buy Mie-chan a birthday present. Y-yeah! I need to do my best!! I need to show my dignity as an u-u-upperclassman!!"

It would have been easier just to kill the girl.

That would eliminate all risk of having her cover blown.

But she did not.

Between good and evil it was evil, but between like and dislike it was like.

Those words came to her even without Kihara Enshuu's emulation.

CHAPTER 5

Hope, or Depthless Darkness.

To_the_Magic.

Part 1

The location was the schoolyard. The time of day was night.

The major players were Kamijou Touma with Imagine Breaker and Kihara Yuiitsu with the stolen World Rejecter.

A few girls were also there.

As was Kamisato Kakeru, collapsed on the ground without a right hand.

After reviewing those conditions in his mind, Kamijou opened his mouth for a shout.

“Salome!! Circle in from the right!!”

“Why would you yell your plans in front of the enem-...oh, I get it.”

The naked raincoat girl grinned in realization and obeyed Kamijou’s instructions.

Kamijou took a small arc and Salome took a larger one.

Kamijou had started running first, but due to their difference in potential, Salome easily passed him. The raincoat girl approached Kihara Yuiitsu with a shifted timing that messed with one’s vision.

But the woman in a lab coat and cheap suit was unfazed.

She simply raised the right hand forcibly attached to her arm.

“...!?”

Kamijou felt fear rising in his stomach.

If Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter clashed, his right hand would be torn off. And then that mysterious "thing" would burst from the wound and spread uncontrollable damage. If that was directed toward Salome, Kamisato, or the others, it would pull the trigger on the worst possible scenario.

Kamijou pressed the soles of his shoes into the ground to slam on the brakes, but then something odd happened.

No, it was the opposite.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

(What? It didn't work!? Or was it a feint!?)

"?"

Even Kihara Yuiitsu tilted her head.

She clenched and unclenched her own(?) right hand and gave it a puzzled look, but then the naked raincoat girl reached her.

"Kee hee hee!!"

Several dry sounds came in quick succession.

Salome was swinging both hands with enough force to tear apart the air and Kihara Yuiitsu used only her right leg. Without letting her foot touch the ground, she made a double and then triple kick.

Afterwards, feet could be heard sliding along the ground.

Surprisingly, it was Salome who was forced back.

The bottom of her double raincoats swayed like a clione.

Without even glancing at the raincoat mass murderer, Yuiitsu stared up at the right hand she held toward the moon.

"Yes, I suppose you wouldn't let something like that kill you."

She finally lowered her hand and smiled thinly.

"The shockwaves propagating from multiple points of impact collide within your body and create deadly bubbles inside your blood vessels. ...A normal human being would have fallen over dead after that. Then again, I'm only using *a cheap imitation of one of Amata-chan's techniques*. Plus, it wouldn't be very romantic if you died already."

She had more than just World Rejecter in the stolen right hand.

Eliminating that would not be enough to defeat her.

Unpleasant sweat poured from Kamijou's body, but he had no choice but to focus on what had to be done. The problem was like tangled yarn or a great mountain, so he could not solve it all at once.

Also, there had been a reason behind Kamijou and Salome circling around to attack from the right.

Kamijou placed a hand behind his back and used his fingers to gather the attention of Ellen and Elza who had been slow to take action. There was something he needed them to do.

Namely...

"'Getting Kamisato first-aid comes first. We'll hold her off, so you tie off his wrist.' ...Is that it? Hee hee. Just kidding!!"

It was almost like the woman had directly read his mind.

The sweat must have been dehydrating him because he could feel his throat growing dry.

Kihara Yuiitsu laughed quietly.

"Well, don't mind me. Do your very best in that fight. Because every minute and second you extend his life is another minute and second of suffering in the knowledge of what he has lost. Hmm. I suppose between good and evil it's evil and between like and dislike it's like. *Which is perfect*."

This time, she opened her right hand wide.

She prepared to swing it mercilessly toward Kamisato Kakeru's sister who was so close by.

That was the perfect target to kill in front of the boy to tear his heart to shreds.

"Dammit. Watch out, Salome!!"

"No, wait!"

"Don't get inside her right hand's shadow! Saying 'do you wish for a new world' acts as the trigger, so use that to time when you dodge!!"

"You moroooooon!! *Why would you tell her how to use iiii

Kamijou's lips grew pale.

"Oh, I seeeee," said Yuiitsu in a jocular tone.

And then...

"*Do you wish for a new world?*"

It sounded like a chunk of the world had been torn away.

Salome, who was so near Yuiitsu, bent her hips. She bent straight back while still standing, as if performing a bridge in gymnastics. Having missed its target, World Rejecter tore into the schoolyard and the dirt completely vanished.

The raincoat girl did not stop moving.

To avoid the second and third attacks sent her way, she performed midair flips for an irregular escape. Her double raincoat fluttered about like a dancer's veil.

"I see, I see. So that's how you use it. Ah ha ha! Amazing. Simply amazing. This completely violates relativity and conservation of mass! Does it use teleportation? In fact, this supernatural phenomenon is so amazing I have to wonder how it avoids triggering the kind of explosion that comes with splitting the atoms!!"

Now Kihara Yuiitsu could make full use of the right hand she had stolen.

Kamijou looked down at his own right hand.

When Fiamma of the Right had taken that hand, Imagine Breaker had ultimately returned to Kamijou because "that which resides in Kamijou Touma's right hand is the medium that contains Imagine Breaker".

Was Kamisato's World Rejecter different?

Or...

(*That which resides in Kamijou's right hand.*)

He gulped and applied that same condition to someone else.

(So if something is making Kihara Yuiitsu appear to be Kamisato Kakeru, will World Rejecter continue to view her as its master!?)

Part 2

The night wind carried whispered voices.

“This ain’t good. That mass murderer is being forced back. Isn’t this really, really bad?”

“Even if it was a surprise attack, taking out Kamisato-san in a single blow is enough on its own for this to qualify as ‘bad’.”

“Academy City is crazy enough at the best of times, but how many bonuses is she gonna place on top of that?”

They came from behind roadside trees.

They came from building rooftops.

“To be honest, I don’t want that sister to get all the credit.”

“It’s not like we have a choice. If we get picky here, Kamisato-kun might die.”

“And unfortunately, it looks like giving Salome a boost would be the best method here.”

It may not have mattered much who had said it.

What mattered was that those girls settled on that as a whole.

“Then let’s go do this.”

“Yes, to save Kamisato Kakeru.”

“If it will save him, I’m willing to give up my humanity.”

Part 3

Mass Murderer Salome raised her head a little.

Then she shouted to Kamijou.

“I’ve got a bit of business to take care of! Kamijou-chan, buy me some time. Thirty seconds should do!!”

“Eh? Ehh!?”

He quickly looked over in time to see the raincoat girl kissing the pocket watch hanging from her neck.

That must have been a sign of resolve for her.

Then she jumped straight back so Kamijou moved out in front of her. This naturally sent him toward Kihara Yuiitsu who was pursuing Salome.

They did not even speak a word.

They only exchanged a momentary glance.

"*Do you wish for a-...*"

"!!"

As she casually swept her hand over, Kamijou's fist struck her wrist in the opposite direction. It was not as nice as a parry, but he had to divert the path of her arm if he could.

But no change came over Yuiitsu's expression.

She twisted her entire body in the same direction as her redirected hand and her knee jabbed sharply into Kamijou's side. The heavy blow brought him to a stop. The single blow took out his diaphragm and forced the oxygen from his lungs.

"Oh...gh!!"

His mind went almost entirely blank, but he could not allow himself to lose consciousness.

Kihara Yuiitsu herself had said she let the shockwaves of multiple blows collide in her opponent's body to create deadly bubbles inside their blood vessels.

If she used that, it was all over for a flesh and blood human like him.

"...!!!!!!"

He forced down the rising urge to vomit and pressed his feet to the ground as they threatened to rise into the air. And in so doing, he pinned down the bottom of Yuiitsu's lab coat as it fluttered around from her spin.

He had no idea what happened next.

He just knew that some kind of impact struck his entire body. He felt like he was enveloped in blows of unclear number and direction, as if he had been thrown in a metal drum which was being beaten with metal bats. His vision was spinning around, so he guessed he himself was spinning vertically through the air.

His back struck the ground with a dull sound of impact.

His sense of time returned.

“Gah!! Agheh!? Khah!!”

“Oh?”

Kihara Yuiitsu sounded lightly confused.

She sounded like someone who had finished cleaning the kitchen and then found an oil stain on the back of the gas range. She had to have analyzed the situation and discovered that the foot on her lab coat had shifted the blows from their calculated positions, but there was no powerful wave of emotion in her voice.

Instead, she made a further barrage.

Her high heel came down like a stake as it targeted Kamijou on the ground.

He rolled to get as far away as possible, but...

“*Do you wish for a new world?*”

“...!! Goddammit!!”

While lying on his side, Kamijou used his arms and legs to hop over like a shrimp and an all-erasing power tore into the spot he had just vacated. The sight of the gouged-out dirt was enough to feel a chill.

He somehow managed to get back on his feet, but there was nothing more he could do.

Imagine Breaker was useless against World Rejecter and he was outmatched when it came to pure martial arts as well. Kamijou had no way of holding back Kihara Yuiitsu.

However...

“Sorry about the wait, Kamijou-chan. *I'm all replenished*. Great job lasting thirty seconds there.”

That voice changed everything.

A smaller form moved past Kamijou. But rather than on the left or right, she jumped by directly above him. Her double raincoats swelled up as they caught the air. This superhuman athletic prowess came from the naked raincoat girl known as Mass Murderer Salome. However, something had changed with her. As her translucent raincoats fluttered around her, she licked her lips, charged in toward Kihara Yuiitsu, and swung her right arm to the side.

Something odd happened.

The entire schoolyard was torn in a half-moon shape along the path of her hand. It was just like she held an invisible blade measuring twenty or thirty meters long.

"..."

Kihara Yuiitsu spun on the spot like a figure skater and let her lab coat spread out into the empty air like a demon's wings.

That was all.

After the violent sound of tearing cloth, the mass murderer gave a belligerent smile.

"Not bad. You actually diverted that blow. Normally, an invisible slash has gotta be a one-hit kill."

"You shouldn't use the convenient word 'invisible' so much. The path is readily apparent from the motion of the particles in the air."

People often thought of shields as tools to block a blade with their weight or thickness, but that was inaccurate. A hail of falling arrows was one thing, but a mass of steel swung down with all of the enemy's might would break one's arm if caught one-handed on a small round shield.

Shields were meant to "divert" or "deflect".

Take that far enough and a single piece of cloth...no, a single piece of paper could be used to alter the path of a slash and avoid a lethal blow.

"But it's looking like you're about at your limit too," said Salome.

"Isn't there only one way to find out?" replied Yuiitsu.

The raincoat girl and the cheap suit and lab coat woman resumed their intense clash.

With Yuiitsu no longer locked onto him, Kamijou felt some careless relief and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Then he grew curious about something.

(What did Salome use that thirty seconds for?)

Salome had not used that violent "invisible blade" before. That meant she had done something. She had said she was replenished, so what exactly had she done back there? For no real reason, Kamijou looked back.

And there he found the answer.

Several dozen girls were carelessly strewn across the schoolyard behind him.

Part 4

It had happened just a moment before.

If one ignored her incredibly unstable personality, Mass Murderer Salome was the Kamisato Faction's strongest fighter by a wide margin. The girls all had a tacit understanding of that, no matter how infuriating they found it.

In the Internal Offering, she had abandoned her body using a chemical cyborg treatment and she had offered up her spare flesh and blood to her god in order to drastically raise her physical abilities.

In the External Offering, she destroyed weapons and shields with her bare hands as a way to offer them up to her god and accumulate their destructive power and traits in a snowball effect.

If the conditions were right, it was rumored that mass murderer could realistically conquer the White House all on her own.

But at the same time, if the conditions were not right, she could not make use of her true power. If her chain of destroying weapons and offering them to her god was broken, she would be nothing more than an eccentric with enough ridiculous strength to break a Japanese sword barehanded.

What did she need to do if she was to defeat as powerful a foe as Kihara Yuiitsu?

What was the best course of action to save Kamisato Kakeru who had lost an arm?

What was necessary if the Kamisato Faction was going to reach for victory as a group rather than working as individuals?

"Oh, honestly!!"

Someone gave a shout.

It was Olivia. She was known as an excellent cosplay girl, but whether it was a jet booster, a magic wand, a laser blade, or special boots for running along a wall, *she would perfectly recreate every single one of the character's gimmicks using either science or magic.* This made her incredibly dangerous in a way the original creators did not want in the slightest, so she was constantly kicked out of events.

“I hate to admit it, but giving this to you looks like the best method.”

Someone dressed as Magical Powered Kanamin jumped into the dark schoolyard, but she clicked her tongue in a way Kanamin never would.

“*So hurry up and break me. That'll give you what you need for your External Officering, won't it!?*”

Salome could not use her full power as a mass murderer because she lacked the stock of weapons she needed to destroy.

More accurately, she had used up her stock from that day by slicing the incinerator and had lacked what she needed to keep her chain going.

That just meant she needed a replacement.

Figures surrounded Salome as she slid back.

There was a pirate girl, a ghost girl, a UFO girl, a phantom thief girl, and a swordsman girl.

The Kamisato Faction was too numerous to count and they all wielded weapons the mass murderer could destroy. Salome was a magician who hunted her prey, but knowing how the power she consumed was used was another factor toward increasing her strength. It was a lot like she held the “soul” of the one who knew the true value of the weapon. It was just like the dances or military performances offered up to a god in ancient times.

Those girls did not seek an individual victory.

They were only thinking of the Kamisato Faction as a whole.

Thus, Salome did not hesitate.

The raincoat girl held her hands together in front of her chest and licked her lips.

“Thanks for the meal☆”

Part 5

“Ah, ah...”

He could only watch in a daze.

Kamijou Touma could only watch Salome fight using her dirty strategy.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Salome and Kihara Yuiitsu were continuing their clash.

But unlike before, the raincoat mass murderer was the one gaining ground. Yuiitsu was well versed in killing techniques and had stolen World Rejecter from Kamisato Kakeru, but Salome did not give up a single step and she clearly knew the secret to victory here.

“Clara. I need a sharper edge! Sacrifice yourself!!”

“!”

Salome was fighting empty-handed, but she was still wielding an invisible blade.

And she had more than just that one form of attack.

“Lime. I need more reach. Time for a trip to the graveyard!!”

“How can you tell people to die so easily!?”

Each time Salome made a request and a girl jumped in, her attack would change.

She literally used the girls as ingredients by breaking their weapons and sweeping their bodies aside.

“Luca. I need to corner her with a quick barrage! You’re up!!”

“Dammit. At least put this to good use!”

It could be a blade, a blunt weapon, a gun, or a chain.

An invisible attack was hard enough to defend against or avoid as it was, but the level of confusion only grew as she freely rearranged its range and type of damage.

It was truly the ultimate consumption strategy. In a nightmarish vision, more and more girls collapsed, passed out, and were thrown away as she continued swapping out weapons and attack methods.

And it did not stop there.

The essence of Salome’s ability was not the invisible attack; it was placing as many different attacks as necessary on top of her empty hands.

Meaning...

“Flamethrower + katana.”

"...!!!!!"

The entire landscape was torn apart. Kihara Yuiitsu and even Kamijou, who was watching from the side, felt their thoughts nearly grind to a halt. It had seemed like an invisible attack from a nonexistent weapon, so the slash had seemed like an effect placed on top of her empty hands. But that was wrong.

It was as if a ton of sharp Japanese swords shot out with the force of a flamethrower.

Kamijou gulped as Salome sacrificed even more girls, transformed them into dreadful attacks, and sent them flying toward the woman in a lab coat and cheap suit.

"Tear gas + sledgehammer."

Once, it was a pressure attack that scattered a blinding smokescreen that contained physical pressure.

"Explosive + longbow + electric guitar."

Once, it was an explosive acoustic weapon that blew out the target's eardrums just by plucking the strings.

"Stun gun + water gun + bullet + hammer throw."

Once, it was a giant anti-materiel sniper bullet that's ballistic path bent complexly like electricity running along a body of water.

(Now I get it.)

Kamijou came to belated understanding of at least a portion of the darkness held by Kamisato Kakeru.

Salome was not forcing the girls of the Kamisato Faction to sacrifice themselves. She was not threatening them or coercing them. It was entirely voluntary. The girls were delighted to offer up their own bodies and they wished to be destroyed. They gave up on an individual victory in order to obtain a group victory. To put it another way, they did not care what happened as long as they could save Kamisato Kakeru who had lost a hand and was suffering from shock due to blood loss.

(That's why it got to him. If he saw this, of course he'd blame the power that had suddenly come to his right hand. This goes well beyond just being a group of friends!!)

It was not the power of his right hand that made Kamisato Kakeru special.

He had not realized it was him himself that had drawn all of those girls to him.

Kamijou had once told him that, but even he felt a chill run through his entire body now.

Hypothetically, if the girls surrounding Kamisato Kakeru truly were only a side effect of his right hand, then wouldn't they *gradually change affiliation* as that hand settled in with Kihara Yuiitsu? Kamijou knew that would never happen, but the idea still reared its ugly head like a meaningless theory about the world coming to an end.

But frustratingly enough, it was effective.

Kihara Yuiitsu was using her lab coat to divert the various attacks and keep the damage to a minimum, but that shield of cloth was growing tattered. If the attacks continued, the article of clothing would completely tear apart and no longer function as a shield. Once she could no longer use it, it was all over. Salome continued changing her attack method, adding on new traits, and raising her destructive power with her never-ending chain. Once she got going, she really did seem to become an unstoppable force.

"!!"

Kihara Yuiitsu must not have wanted a long battle because she took a somewhat forceful step forward.

She put herself in danger to move closer and she swung her forcibly attached right hand.

Its shadow crawled along Salome's body.

And this other monster spoke the words needed to stop the raincoat mass murderer's violence.

"*Do you wish for a new world?*"

This time.

This time Kamijou Touma's mind truly went blank.

He did not even have time to shout Salome's name.

This one was fatal. It had been a clean hit. The woman had spoken the words with her hand's shadow entirely placed on the girl's body. When World Rejecter activated, it held enough power to defeat even Magic Gods by the dozen. Salome's body would be swiftly "exiled" to the spare territory between related timelines. Basically, a living human being would be sent to another world, never to be seen again.

Or so it should have been.

"*Of course that won't work. Don't take the Kamisato Faction so lightly, especially when you're just borrowing that thing.*"

Kamijou had only seen one side of the previous events, so this was beyond his understanding.

But Kamisato Kakeru's right hand only blew away indecisive people who had conflicting desires. And anyone he had accepted had no such conflicting desires and had found a single path to follow in this wide world.

Patricia Birdway had been the same.

It was because she had that qualification that Kamisato Kakeru had been able to rub her head and shake her hand. He had accepted her personality and announced his respect for her specifically because of the pure mind that prevented her from being blown away by the touch of that hand.

So...

"World Rejecter's not gonna work on anyone from the Kamisato Faction, don'tcha think? After all, we were all accepted by Kamisato Kakeru and we've all proven that we don't have any conflicting desires."

"..."

Kihara Yuiitsu must not have known about that condition.

If she had, she would not have been so careless. That was hardly surprising since she had only just stolen the right hand and her knowledge of it was based on the "mistaken warning" that Kamijou had let slip.

On top of that, Salome had made a show of avoiding her right hand until now.

"And I'm sorry to say, Miss Revenge, that I'm willing to kill if it's for that goddamn stupid brother who so enjoys that creepy harem of his! That conviction will never be shaken!!"

But even so, the mistake was a devastating one.

Once the initial attack failed, this was back in Mass Murderer Salome's territory.

She had consumed so many girls to thoroughly polish up her External Offering's chain. She could now slice a warship in two with a single swing of her arm and she swung that arm almost casually.

Kihara Yuiitsu gave up on using her shield.

For the first time, she jumped to the side with all her might to dodge.

But not even that was enough.

A moment later, Kihara Yuiitsu's right hand was severed with a noise so pleasant it seemed out of place.

The rough black threads that had sewn on the stolen hand were torn. It was not a perfect cut, but it made it more than two-thirds of the way through and it looked even more painful dangling there only partially severed.

“First, I’ll be taking that right hand back.”

The raincoat girl smiled fiercely.

“That belongs to my goddamn stupid brother. That power was given to Kamisato Kakeru. Figuring out how to deal with it is his job, so an outsider like you can’t decide for him.”

“Hee hee.”

Then something odd happened.

Kihara Yuiitsu laughed despite having her right hand more than two-thirds severed.

“It’s true I didn’t know the exact conditions for activating World Rejecter. But you seem to be mistaken about something too. Perhaps I’m only aware of this thanks to gaining the power for myself.”

“?”

“Such strange symbolism. Just like Imagine Breaker is both the power to reject and a reference point or restoration point for everything, World Rejecter is both the power to accept and something like deletion software. Instead of simply destroying its target, it erases it by processing it into something no one can read.”

She sounded calm and she did not stop.

“Maybe that was a little off topic. No, I suppose not. World Rejecter holds the power to erase Magic Gods by the dozen, but it does not completely destroy them. If you can never see them again, it might as well be death, but that isn’t quite accurate.”

“Salome... This isn’t good. Fall back. This is really, really bad!!”

“If it can send them there, this right hand must cross between the two territories. You can think of it like Dejima during the isolationist Sakoku period. And if this right hand acts as a convenient ‘end of the world’ for what lies on the other side...”

Kamijou felt something crawl down his back.

He could not let her say this.

This alone he could never let her say.

And then Kihara Yuiitsu raised her nearly destroyed right hand as if to smash those strange warning bells in his mind.

She held it forward.

"...then wouldn't I also be able to use it like this? ...Paging Niang-Niang."

Something bubbled out from Kihara Yuiitsu's wrist...no, *from within the right hand.*

"Ah."

Before Kamijou's thoughts caught up, it was already beginning.

Something flowed out from the gaping wound. It resembled a sticky fluid and it wrapped around Kihara Yuiitsu's arm as it moved up to her shoulder. Its surface began bubbling even more intensely.

Something was swelling out from her shoulder.

It looked like two arms were attached to the same shoulder, but that was inaccurate.

Something had grown there.

Something long and slender had crawled up from the broken right hand and grown out from the shoulder.

"Ahhh."

It was a slender girl's body. Her skin was far too pale to be a living human, a charm was attached to her forehead, a white mini China dress covered her body, and a provocative look filled her eyes.

"Niang-Niang. She should have only been able to appear 'within' the right hand, but you just had to do this, didn't you? Even when they sealed off the nation, Western ideas still found their way in and everyone who saw the black ships floating out at sea could not help but tremble. In the same way, you might be able to restrict their coordinates, but there is no way to suppress the very existence of a god."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Kamijou Touma screamed at the top of his lungs.

A moment later, Niang-Niang spread her arms and all ten fingers transformed into independent swords, spears, axes, staffs, etc. They all shook like musical instruments and sent out a high-pitched din.

And...

And...

And...

This was the ultimate majesty of a god.

It was what lurked within a certain boy's right hand.

The power of a supposedly defeated Magic God filled the dark night of that school.

Part 6

Starting in District 7, a hopelessly powerful shockwave swept across Academy City.

Part 7

To be honest, Misaka Mikoto was hoping for some kind of excitement.

Just the day before, she had run across a raincoat girl while walking around town at night. That girl had seemed to exist beyond all common sense and she smugly wielded a "new possibility". That was a great hope for Misaka Mikoto who was just stewing at the moment. Tokiwadai's Ace had inappropriately hoped that she might find some more excitement that would act as a road sign.

But once she flinched back from that tremor in the earth, she felt her head rapidly cooling.

She realized just how much her mind had been boiling.

"What...was that?"

She turned toward it.

Something she was unfamiliar with was there. If she went there, she could find out what it was. A new world would open up before her eyes. However, she felt none of the previous elation. Her heart began pounding in her chest, but it only contained an ominous tension. She could tell something she did not want to see and did not want to accept awaited her there.

It seemed to be at a school.

Based on the size of the campus and the number of school buildings, it may have been a combined middle and high school.

But the metal fence had toppled, the trees had fallen, and the recently restored glass had shattered.

People were collapsed all over the schoolyard, but were they really students? Several dozen girls of middle and high school age were passed out there.

And on top if it all, she saw three other people.

One was a raincoat girl who had been torn to pieces.

One was a spiky-haired boy holding that “wreckage” while lying bloody on the ground.

One was a woman in a lab coat and cheap suit who had a truly bizarre monster growing from her right arm.

She did not actually say anything.

Her scream was more like pure noise.

Misaka Mikoto ran past the collapsed fence and toward the boy. Kamijou Touma looked unsteadily back at her while holding the raincoat who had lost everything below her waist and whose head was bent at an odd angle. He mouthed the words “stay away”, but she could not obey that.

“Heh heh.”

The lab coat woman did not seem particularly bothered by the sudden intruder.

With an odd noise, the right arm with its split wrist underwent a great transformation.

“Eh heh heh.”

Something happened as the boy and girls watched on.

A mini-China girl had already come from that right arm, but now some even odder things burst from the shoulder.

One was a tall gentle-looking blond man with fur attached much like a lion’s mane.

One was a brown man with a black, polished round mirror in place of a leg.

One was a young and beautiful woman with a black Western mourning dress and a veil of the same color hiding her expression.

One was a half-naked young man with war paint tattoos covering his entire body and a silver prosthetic for his left arm.

Including the mini-China, there were five in all.

The original human hand was hidden from view as if buried inside a sea anemone. The five figures had become giant fingers and the whole functioned as a gigantic hand which the lab coat woman freely opened and closed as her new fingers.

“Ah ha ha ha

After all, there was no way they could win. After fleeing through Academy City on the acrobike, it had been someone else who had ultimately finished off the High Priest. If that had failed, the Arrowhead Comet might have blown away Academy City.

And there were more than one?

They were going to attack by the dozen?

"....."

Mikoto desperately supported Kamijou's bloody back and turned her head.

And she saw...

"Eh heh."

A monster.

That hopeless lab coat monster was laughing in the moonlight.

"Yes, yes. Involving unrelated people in your personal revenge is foolish. Between good and evil it's evil, and between like and dislike it's dislike... Sensei never would have allowed this. Ah ha ha."

"Pant...pant..."

"But I don't care. It may be different from Sensei, *but that's what makes it so wonderful.* I'm realizing that more and more now. I still have a long way to go and I'm still pathetically soft like clay, but...that's exactly why. I must not hesitate to mold each little thing into shape to create my unique path. Yes, yes...no. Maybe abandoning your ideals for your goal is another form of romance. But anyway..."

She tilted her head a little.

She held out that right hand which held the greatest and most dreadful power.

"If you're going to interfere, then die. Right here and now."

It was all a copy of that day.

Misaka Mikoto had clenched her teeth at her own powerlessness while fleeing from the High Priest.

And now they did not even have the convenient acrobike.

Plus, the Magic Gods would be approaching by the dozen.

Part 8

“Kh...!?”

A small form groaned in an Academy City hospital.

It was Patricia Birdway.

She was the girl who had a large part of her body replaced by a Magic God known as Nephthys.

Part 9

Kamijou was pretty sure his consciousness had repeatedly cut out intermittently over the course of a few seconds.

Once his mind finally stabilized like a fluorescent light on the verge of dying, he realized Misaka Mikoto was carrying him over her shoulder.

His vision was spinning, he felt the biting night wind, an odd sense of floating lifted his stomach, he felt the vibration of non-solid footing like building walls and signs, they were moving with overwhelming speed while seemingly ignoring gravity altogether, and the lights from car headlights and building windows were trailing behind them at unbelievable angles.

He gradually realized what was happening.

(She’s using magnetism or something else to jump from building to building?)

Since he was draped over her shoulder, his unsteady vision saw the scenery behind them.

And he saw something there.

Mikoto was jumping from wall to wall of the high-rise buildings without using any noticeable footholds, but someone was accurately following her.

It was Kihara Yuiitsu, usurper of World Rejecter.

She had forcibly drawn out the power of the many Magic Gods that Kamisato Kakeru had blown away.

“...I’m sorry.”

Kamijou gulped and heard a trembling girl's voice in his ear.

It came from Mikoto who was at the center of the action.

Something major must have happened because the tattered cloth of her coat was carried away by the wind.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for wanting some excitement and wanting to leave the normal rails without knowing what that meant. If this is because of me...because I asked for this...then...uuh..."

Kamijou did not know what lay at the foundation of those words.

He was unsure how to respond as she held him.

"She's been like this the whole time. There's nothing as bad as a depressed romantic, don'tcha think? Who knows when she's gonna take a dive from the top of a long escalator."

"Eh? Ah? Wah!? Salome!?"

Kamijou was so surprised because he had not thought the weight clinging to his back was enough to be a human being. It was only as heavy as a collapsible bicycle or maybe a little heavier. He hesitantly turned his head and saw the silver-haired girl's head close enough to rub her cheek against his upper arm. However, he did not feel her legs because everything below her navel had likely been destroyed.

It was a lot like how self-proclaimed TV personalities would wrap a cardigan's sleeves around their neck.

In addition to the feminine softness (even if her body was technically artificial), he felt something pointed and hard that must have been the toy pocket watch hanging from her neck.

She may have made sure to protect that even if it meant losing her lower body.

"Oh, dammit. This must be what I get for tearing Claire in two. This has gotta be what they mean when they talk about karma."

"What kind of visual is this!? I'm being carried like a bag of rice by a middle school girl who's jumping around the city at night and I've got a mass murderer clinging to my back after being torn to pieces!? Fake ghost photos are less horrifying than this!"

"Well, of course the killers stand out more than the killed. And this isn't the time for a nice chat, don'tcha think? ...That woman's way crazier than me and she's about to reach us!!"

Kihara Yuiitsu's right arm had split apart at the shoulder. It formed the five upper bodies of the five Magic Gods. One of them moved. It was the one that looked like a small girl with pale skin and a white mini-China.

It was Niang-Niang.

Her fingers transformed into swords, spears, axes, staffs, etc.

Those weapons tore through the dark night like laser beams.

No lightning surged from the tips of the blades and the spears were not actually thrown.

They extended.

The ten weapons grew explosively and spread out in a fan shape. Shocked, Mikoto quickly used magnetism to change direction in midair and just barely avoided them. One after another, they stabbed into the wall of a nearby building.

"..."

Next thing she knew, there was a face there.

The concept of distance was meaningless. It took her a moment to realize that Niang-Niang's weapons had shrunk back down and forcibly "pulled" her and Kihara Yuiitsu to instantly fill the gap between them.

Yuiitsu twisted her body in midair to unleash a kick.

This absolute method would create bubbles in the blood and kill anyone cleanly hit by it, so Salome placed her half-destroyed but still artificial body in the path of the attack and the heavy blow struck her body.

Mikoto shouted something.

She could no longer feel the weight of Salome or of Kamijou.

She wondered whether to go after the boy or fight back against the threat before her eyes, but then the lab coat woman held out her right arm.

She recognized what grew from there.

It was the strange being that had appeared before Mikoto and Kamijou almost for fun while they were being pursued by the High Priest.

It was the owner of the strange weapons that had pierced her flat chest.

It was Niang-Niang.

"...!!!???"

Her fighting spirit was drowned out by fear.

Niang-Niang's fingers seemed to explode and the many weapons shot forward at close range. Mikoto immediately created a shield out of iron sand, but a dreadful impact ran through it. She flew back like she had been shot point-blank by a shotgun with only a metal door to protect her. She fell toward the scattered artificial lights of the city's night.

"Gaaaah!?"

Meanwhile, Kamijou crashed through a nearby building window like an artillery shell. The spiky-haired boy bounced along the dusty floor with Salome along for the ride like a backpack. He finally stopped when his back slammed into an exposed square column.

There were no partitions and no wallpaper. There was nothing but identical columns at regular intervals.

He smelled glue and synthetic fiber construction boards.

(The building's...under construction?)

"And what happened to Misaka?"

"We have bigger things to worry about! Here she comes!!"

He did not know why, but Kamijou felt an unpleasant sweat covering his entire body.

He immediately moved from the column and rolled to the side as a fierce rush pursued him from outside the window.

It was just like machinegun fire.

Some kind of projectile flew in at incredible speed. Kamijou could no longer follow them visually. As he fled to another column and glanced back at the floor, he did not see obvious bullet holes.

He saw masses of darkness the size of baseballs.

They must have been bending the light because the surrounding scenery stretched a bit like candy art. It looked like everything was being sucked in toward the center.

"That's gotta be pomegranate seeds," said Salome. "This would be Persephone...no, maybe Proserpina. Anyway, there's a legend of a goddess being taken to the underworld, falling for a trick on the way back to the surface, eating a pomegranate of the underworld,

and being unable to remove the curse of death. That fruit forcibly brings one to the underworld...to death. However it happens, there's no escape once they get inside you."

"..."

Was this another Magic God like Niang-Niang?

However, Kamijou finally took an intentionally slow breath.

He was still covered in an ominous sweat, but his tension was now directed elsewhere.

"This is odd."

"What is? And can someone raised in Academy City really analyze magic?"

"It's not that."

Kamijou leaned against the square column to hide with Salome positioned between himself and the column.

"Or rather, all of this is odd."

"?"

"It does look like Yuiitsu is using magic and I'm willing to bet your analysis is correct. But she isn't Kihara Kagun...that is, Bersi. I doubt there are all that many Kiharas that can just use magic like this. This probably really is that...Proserpina? person's spell though."

"This isn't a web novel and I don't have time to listen to you go on and on about your interests. Try to keep it under 140 characters."

"If this was a Magic God's attack, I doubt this would work as a shield," rapidly summed up Kamijou. "At full power, Othinus could instantly crush the galaxy down to its pre-Big Bang state. And with some of his power gone, the High Priest could fuse with a comet and bring an ice age to the earth. Yet we're fine just by hiding behind a column? They're firing like crazy and we defended against it with a mere shield? That's not possible. The Magic God brand isn't that cheap."

His mind had gone blank because Niang-Niang, a major figure for that brand, had appeared.

But even that was odd.

Even if Kihara Yuiitsu could draw out the power of those many Magic Gods, she wouldn't need to show it off. Kamijou and the others had no way of killing a Magic God. It was hard to say they had even defeated Othinus or the High Priest.

The Magic Gods were just like an immortal monster from an old splatter film. You ran across them in an unreasonable encounter, you were chased around by them, and the best you could hope for was to escape in the very, very end. There simply was no defeating them. Even the police or the army would be killed if they challenged them to a straight fight. That was what the Magic Gods were supposed to be.

World Rejecter might be the only thing in the entire world that could defeat them. That was what made that right hand so special. And at the moment, Kihara Yuiitsu had exclusive use of that hand. She had both the wild beast and its natural predator.

In other words, nothing made any sense from the moment they had survived Niang-Niang appearing in that dark schoolyard.

“I think Kihara Yuiitsu is definitely using magic.”

Kamijou gulped.

“But I think she’s using something other than the Magic Gods.”

“I don’t think we have time to sit around and think! Dammit!!”

Someone ignored all common sense and jumped in through the high-rise building’s window.

It was a woman in a cheap suit whose tattered lab coat fluttered like demon wings as several Magic Gods grew from her right arm.

“Heh heh.”

She may have been laughing, but that was not comforting in the slightest.

The force and pitch of her voice were unstable, so it scorched the nerves of anyone who heard it.

“Eh heh heh.”

There was no speaking with her.

Even if they did exchange words, they could never share in what she was feeling.

“Heh heh heh hah hah!!!!”

Of the five Magic Gods, it was of course Niang-Niang that moved.

Ten weapons shot from her ten fingers and tore through space like laser beams.

But...

Even so...

Nevertheless...

Kamijou Touma's right hand easily deflected those surefire attacks.

He did not even need his fist.

It was the casual action of brushing aside a fly.

Kamijou had destroyed Niang-Niang's weapons with Imagine Breaker back when the countless weapons had shot from her sleeve and pierced Mikoto's chest.

But even so, this was different.

There was tension, unease, and even fear.

But those nerve-frying and dangerous emotions were only those caused by Kihara Yuiitsu herself. With five extraordinary monsters like the Magic Gods, he could easily have given up on any attempt to fight and passed out.

But he had finally seen it.

He had grasped the truth.

"Those aren't the real Magic Gods."

He looked at his enemy again.

He faced their true identity.

"They aren't even 'what lurks inside that right hand'."

It was odd that he had been able to deflect a Magic God's attack with just one hand.

He relied on that sense that something was not right.

"Those are only fakes made to look like the Magic Gods. Yes, you let *Sample Shoggoth invade your body* in order to attach that severed right hand!!"

That was the same thing that had once eaten into Patricia Birdway.

It was an amorphous monster that could take any form.

He had no idea how she had tamed it and it may have been eating into her as they spoke, but she had accepted it as her weapon despite the risk.

Which meant...

“You created models of the Magic Gods and you had some seemingly-related magic prepared from somewhere else. ...*The attenuated St. Germain virus.* It’s hard to believe, but you apparently surrendered your own brain to trick the right hand’s recognition. If I’m remembering right, the people controlled by that could use magic regardless of their original knowledge or ability! Specifically, they could use magic related to carbon and plants, and that means that pomegranate spell you just used!!”

She had just been borrowing the Magic Gods’ reputation.

By creating a hollow image of them and using magic when she should not have been able to, she had made it look like she had summoned the Magic Gods.

Also, Kihara Yuiitsu had switched strategies as soon as she had learned World Rejecter was useless against Mass Murderer Salome and the rest of the Kamisato Faction girls.

In other words, she had wanted to change the stagnant and unfavorable mood covering the dark schoolyard. World Rejecter had proved less almighty than hoped, so she had wanted to give it new value using the great impact of...no, the bluff of drawing out the Magic Gods at will.

She had even intentionally let her hand nearly be severed as part of the act.

“Come to think of it, a Magic God and something crawling out of a right arm were part of Baggage City. At the very end there, the incomplete Othinus destroyed my wrist and then crushed what came out. And Kihara Kagun and some other Kiharas were there. Kihara Yuiitsu, were you there too by any chance? Maybe in a position that gave you access to a report on everything that happened?”

That was why she had been able to do it.

She had what it took to come up with that strategy, to prepare everything needed to pull it off, and to put on an act that would fool even someone who had actually met the Magic Gods.

Once he knew that, there was nothing to be afraid of.

There was no more need to be bound by fear.

His opponent was not absolute. She was only human, so out of fear of defeat, she had thought up a trick and twisted the truth to make herself look greater than she was.

He had to correct that.

He had to solve that.

He had to reveal that.

But Kihara Yuiitsu only tilted her head a little as she held up her misshapen right arm.

"*So what?*"

This had done nothing to her.

She had taken no damage whatsoever.

An explosive noise followed.

Niang-Niang, Proserpina, and the Magic Gods of unknown names stickily lost their shape and became a single large stream which surged toward Kamijou like sticky pollution sprayed from a water truck.

"!!"

He immediately held up his right hand.

"How many times do I have to tell you? My goal has been revenge from the beginning."

Her voice reached him.

That cruel parasitic lifeform tore into one's flesh with its countless fangs and claws, slipped inside the body, and melted the fat away to reside within its new host. Kihara Yuiitsu remained unfazed as that precious weapon was blown away by his right hand.

Making a flashy attack like that forced Kamijou to use his right hand.

In the meantime, he was pinned to the spot and could not move or flee.

She had used up Project Shoggoth just to hold him in place.

"The power of the Magic Gods never mattered. Whether I could reach that level or not was irrelevant. I only needed to mow down Kamisato Kakeru and everyone he cares for. Between good and evil it's evil, and between like and dislike it's dislike. This is my unique romance that not even Sensei could reach. To put it another way, the Magic Gods' power would have been entirely meaningless if I couldn't use it for my revenge. That's all this is."

"…"

“You idiot! Don’t try to block that!!”

By the time Salome shouted from his back, it was too late.

Kihara Yuiitsu’s foot was flying his way.

Just like when a ball was suddenly thrown at someone, Kamijou reflexively held his arms up to guard. He immediately realized that was a mistake.

Yuiitsu’s attacks were not meant to thrash him with their great speed or weight.

The shockwaves propagating from the multiple points of impact would shake his blood in a way that created enough bubbles to make this single attack deadly.

In other words, it did not matter if he blocked it or not.

It was like a needle soaked in deadly poison. Once it touched him, it was all over.

“Ah...gah!!!???”

Intense heat filled his arm and he could feel it flowing from his arm to his torso.

Salome took action on his back.

“Damn you!!”

This time his supposed ally struck his aching arm.

Immediately, the strange heat vanished.

“Hm. So you used the same sort of shockwaves to counteract the bubbles. Well done copying it in so short a time.”

Yuiitsu did not sound amused in the slightest.

“But didn’t I tell you? This was always about my revenge. I am taking my own path and it is different from Sensei’s. That’s why I’m not too picky about this kind of thing.”

“...”

“I’ll use whatever it takes. That includes magic, martial arts, and even...something like this.”

She reached into her tattered lab coat’s pocket.

That action sent an unpleasant sensation down Kamijou's spine, but even as close as Yuiitsu was, he did not have time to stop her.

A moment later, she held an oddly-shaped gun.

It almost looked like a toy. Rather than a handgun optimized for military use, it looked like the starting pistol fired to begin an athletics festival race.

But he could tell.

His throat went dry as she aimed it his way.

"This is the UL Exploder. Then again, your average person might not be able to figure out where its name comes from or how it does what it does."

As soon as she pulled the trigger, space itself seemed to explode.

Part 10

When the blast struck the boy, he flew across the partially constructed building.

He was tossed right out a window that lacked any glass.

"Now, then."

(My data says he is a top priority target for Kamisato Kakeru. Not that I expect being thrown from the twentieth floor will kill him.)

Yuiitsu slowly walked toward the window while shaking her cheap-looking handgun that was reminiscent of an athletics festival starting pistol. The surging river of her right arm audibly dispersed and the original slender arm reappeared from the eye of the storm.

The injury to the wrist had been forcibly sewn back together.

That also meant Kamisato Kakeru's right hand was connected to her once more.

The UL Exploder induced false dust explosions. It was only effective within Academy City, so even one step outside the city and it would be entirely useless. However, it had not been originally developed to cause anything as dubiously effective as a dust explosion.

The voyeur of a Board Chairman had covered the city with nanodevices known as Underline.

By gathering them together and detonating them, she could create a space that, for a very short period of time, could not be monitored by the higher ups. With that in mind, its name should make a fair amount of sense.

She had built this during a happier time.

When she had shown it off to the golden retriever who she respected more than anyone else, he had praised her skill yet still scolded her for some reason.

Yes, he had said not to bully "him".

"..."

For just a moment, Kihara Yuiitsu's eyes gently narrowed.

But they returned to normal a moment later.

The warm kindness of what remained in her heart led her to coldly freeze her expression all the more.

"It's about time I finished this."

Between good and evil it was evil, and between like and dislike it was dislike.

She knew that, yet that monster continued down her own path.

The one traveling that unique path was not interested in the concepts of good and evil that controlled the masses.

"For whatever reason, Kamisato Kakeru needs Kamijou Touma. I can't wait to see the look on his face when I toss the boy's corpse in front of him."

Part 11

There was nothing he could do.

Kamijou Touma was thrown out into the dark sky with Salome clinging to his back.

"Waaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Flailing his limbs around was meaningless.

The countless invisible hands of gravity grabbed at his body and forced him down toward the ground. Needless to say, he would die on impact.

His fall had started at the twentieth floor and salvation came at the tenth floor halfway down.

Misaka Mikoto was clinging to the wall there and she matched their relative speeds to catch Kamijou in her arms.

“Gh...!!” she groaned. “Are you okay?”

“What happened with you after that? You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Mikoto stood on the building wall and let her shoes slide down to negate the impact, but Kamijou’s eyes were focused upwards.

“Our questions can wait!”

“Yeah, it’s looking like we have bigger things to worry about!!”

The enemy was coming from up there.

She used the amorphous Sample Shoggoth to cling to the wall and crawl down like a strange insect. The monster named Kihara Yuiitsu had locked onto them.

“Run, Misaka!! If you aren’t going to make it otherwise, then leave me behind!!”

It was too late.

An explosion burst directly behind Kihara Yuiitsu. It was likely the power of that mysterious handgun-shaped device she had used to toss Kamijou and Salome out the window earlier. This time, she used the explosive blast to accelerate her own body and she approached with the speed of an artillery shell. She fell far faster than free fall in a suicidal dive toward the depths of the earth or toward the underworld.

The distance between them vanished in an instant.

Truly just an instant.

“!!”

Mikoto immediately kicked off the wall and threw herself into the night sky with Kamijou in her arms. Having missed her target, Yuiitsu slammed on the brakes using that same wall and she did not hesitate to aim her UL Exploder at them. As she pulled the trigger, small explosions several meters across pursued Mikoto through the air.

They never actually hit Mikoto, but they greatly restricted her range of movement. Then Yuiitsu played her next hand.

It was literally a hand.

Her entire right arm changed form. It became a black torrent which bent like a whip and struck the girl's entire body from above.

This time, there was no avoiding it.

With a tremendous roar, Mikoto's body was sent hurtling toward the ground.

She tried to attach to another building with magnetism, but it was too late.

She only managed to shift her landing point a little.

"Gah!?"

After slipping from the girl's arms, Kamijou and Salome fell into one of the trees placed at even intervals alongside a major road. Multiple branches broke beneath them which eliminated enough of their momentum. He just barely avoided dying from the fall, but now he had scratches all over his body.

"Agh...cough, cough! Wh-where did Misaka end up?"

"Focus on what's above us instead!!"

Salome warned him from his back, but then something unexpected happened.

"...What?"

"She isn't...coming?"

Kihara Yuiitsu's next attack never came.

That in and of itself was delightful, but there had to be more to it than that. That woman had no reason to be cautious or hold back, so this result was strange.

"What is she looking at?"

Kamijou caught his breath while looking up at Yuiitsu as she clung upside-down to the building wall.

The monster was not even looking their way. She was focused elsewhere.

Also, Mikoto was not with them.

She seemed to have fallen somewhere else.

"Dammit. Is Misaka her top priority!?"

Part 12

Misaka Mikoto made sure nothing was wrong with her bones and organs after her fall. She moved each of her fingers and toes and took deep breaths to see if anything hurt.

(Where am I?)

The ceiling was far overhead and she could guess she had been the one to create the hole there. Once she got up, she found a space much larger than a school gym. Based on the facilities and equipment, it seemed to be a cold storage warehouse, but it was not functioning. It was room temperature and actually warmer than the December night outside.

However, that was not what bothered her most of all.

“What...is this?”

The warehouse was not lined with ice cream and other frozen foods or fish and other meat products.

There were weapons.

Just a lot of weapons.

There was a missile pod shaped like a giant container. There was long excavation drill that could probably break through a bank vault door. There was a flamethrower and a plasma blade. There was even the weapon from which Mikoto’s signature Railgun got its name. She also saw the ammunition, fuel, power sources, and maintenance equipment for them all.

Surprisingly, they did not seem made to be loaded on tanks, armored trucks, fighter craft, attack craft, cruisers, or battleships.

(You’re kidding, right?)

As she looked across, circled around, and observed the mountain of weaponry, Mikoto reached a general and unbelievable conclusion.

(Are these weapons meant to be directly equipped to and used by someone? What kind of crazy concept were these designed for?)

She doubted these would be stored in a mere cold storage warehouse.

She did not know why someone had stored them here, but the cold storage warehouse was clearly just camouflage.

She heard a small sound from the mountain of silhouettes.

She thought someone was hiding there, but that was not the case.

With a great roar, the collection of machines rose up like a plesiosaur and looked down at her. Just like metal nails sucked in by a powerful magnet, the countless weapons were gathering together and taking a biological form.

(Is this thing...appraising me as its user...?)

Mikoto gulped and looked at it once more.

“Anti...”

She traced her fingers along the barrel of a Gatling gun twice her height that had not joined the plesiosaur and she read off the letters engraved there.

“*Anti-Art Attachment*...?”

Misaka Mikoto did not understand what that meant.

But a fleeting thought occurred to her. If she had this, might she be able to oppose an extraordinary monster like Kihara Yuiitsu? She did not know what kind of operating system it used, but as Academy City’s most powerful Electromaster, might she be able to hack into that system, rewrite it, and hijack it?

It helped that a burning tension assaulted her.

That woman in a lab coat and cheap suit had surpassed the category of a single human and seemed to send great pressure toward Mikoto from the darkness surrounding the girl on all sides.

No matter how dulled by peace she was, Mikoto could not imagine exposing herself to the city’s dangerous night while unarmed.

The thought came to her almost like a devilish temptation.

It may have been unfortunate for her that she had been separated from Kamijou Touma.

“_____”

She slowly exhaled and once more placed her hand on the giant Gatling gun.

She tried to reveal the structure of its system to see if she could use it or not.

Something happened almost immediately.

"...!!!???"

She felt a strange chill like a giant tongue licking vertically across her entire back, so she instinctually let go.

It was not just this one weapon. She heard the strange sounds of the various machines in the large warehouse linking together.

What was she to do?

Was she prepared to grab this and pay the price?

(What...was that?)

Her heart was pounding. An unpleasant sweat poured from her forehead. Inescapable confusion filled her mind. To repeat, Misaka Mikoto was Academy City's strongest Electromaster. She could directly control electricity, so there was no programming language she could not read and no firewall she could not break. Even if it was a brand new sort of firewall built in a completely unknown language, it had already nearly raised the white flag just by relying on electricity in the first place.

Yet she had been unable to read it.

There was an entirely blank spot.

No, it was not that there was simply nothing written there. The weapon operating system was laid out in exacting detail, but with that alone, the circle was closed and it did not function as a circuit. And that blank spot was clearly filled with something Misaka Mikoto was unfamiliar with or could not understand.

What was it?

What was that system built to control?

It was shaped like a weapon, but it was not a weapon. It wore the skin of science, but it could not be explained using science. It reminded her of the stimulation, expanse, and possibilities she had felt in her clash with Mass Murderer Salome, but this was much stronger. It was hopelessly powerful and seemed to have no end at all.

A human might be able to manage the water filling a cup.

But that same human could not hope to manage all of the seawater filing the seven seas.

If she dove in or incorporated this into herself, she would more than just drown. The waves would toss her about and dash her against the rocks until she changed form like the fine white sand of the beaches. Then it would drag her down to the watery depths and the immense pressure would crush her until she had no form left at all.

There was a brand new possibility here and it might allow her to peer into a world she had never before seen, but if she did that, it would be “someone else” standing there, not Misaka Mikoto. Or so it seemed to her.

She took back what she had thought before.

The threat she felt here was equal to or possibly even greater than what awaited outside. The threat in here – or the identity of what it would produce – far surpassed what she could handle on her own.

She must not touch this dragon.

Doing so would definitively set her growth in the wrong direction.

If she wished to walk by that boy’s side, she could not continue this way.

She could not.

She could not.

She could not.

Part 13

As Kihara Yuiitsu clung upside-down to the building wall using Sample Shoggoth, she stared into the cold storage warehouse through the hole and clicked her tongue.

This was the first major unexpected event for her.

(Damn, I missed one. You’re telling me there was an entire spare storage warehouse for Sensei’s Anti-Art Attachment left over!?)

That golden retriever had stored his equipment in all twenty-three districts of Academy City. As his aide, Kihara Yuiitsu had been aware of Kihara Noukan’s “possessions” to a certain extent, but her knowledge had not been perfect.

Kihara Noukan had stood out even among the Kiharas and he had been working with Board Chairman Aleister.

Even if their technique had been as bizarre as could be, the basic frame around it was just a powered suit and thus entirely belonged to the science side.

And now Academy City’s #3 had fallen there.

She was the most powerful Electromaster.

The strict firewalls and authentication would be entirely useless. Tokiwadai's Ace could directly manipulate the electricity, so it was possible she could rewrite a portion of the system and equip the weapon as her own.

Yes, rewrite it.

That would mean erasing a trace of that golden retriever.

Kihara Yuiitsu's revenge should have been top priority for her, but that possibility briefly erased all other thoughts from her mind.

Her unique brand of romance whispered to her that there was something else to be done.

"...Don't touch that."

This had nothing to do with the frightening specs of the Anti-Art Attachment.

Her thinking did not even get that far.

"Get your dirty hands off what Sensei left behiii

no idea how she had tamed either St. Germain or the Shoggoth. In fact, he could not understand how anyone could let those things into their body even if they were safe.

“Is she headed straight for that warehouse!? We’ve only got my two legs, so there’s no way we can catch up!”

“No, that’s fine. Just run along the surface and keep her in sight. I’ll make sure this works.”

“?”

“Ahh, ahh. I’ve fought so many people I don’t remember who I told what. Kamijou-chan, did I tell you about the exact conditions needed to activate my External Offering?”

Salome grinned with her arms around his shoulders like a strange TV personality’s cardigan.

“My External Offering is Celtic sacrifice magic, you see. Any weapon I destroy is offered up to my god and I gain its effects and traits. But if I don’t keep the chain going within three minutes, it all resets to zero. The growing snowball will fall apart.”

“And? How long has it been since we were in the schoolyard? Your chain or whatever has to have broken by now, so you’ve lost the effect of the Kamisato Faction’s self-sacrifice.”

“*Who ever said that?*”

She whispered in his ear and he felt an ominous chill, even though Salome was supposed to be an ally (for the time being).

The mass murderer ignored that and continued.

“Hey, Kamijou-chan. A mass murderer like me needs to make sure her weapon is nice and sharp, don’tcha think? I like to keep my snowball intact as long as I can, so I need to keep my chain going no matter what it takes.”

“...?”

“Even the most pitifully weak weapon will preserve the chain. And conveniently, when I’m holding onto you from behind, this hood sticking out from inside your uniform – is it from a hoodie? – creates a nice big bag that no one else can see inside.”

“Wait. Don’t tell me...”

“And...have – you – forgotten? My entire body is artificial. That means I’m a weapon myself. I certainly didn’t expect for that Yuiitsu person to tear me to pieces, but that just means I need to use that to my advantage, don’tcha think? *By gathering the artificial organs that were still usable and stuffing them in your hood, I have a decent stock to*

keep my chain going. Each time the chain is about to run out, I bite into one to destroy it and offer it up to my god. That way I can maintain my destructive power."

He was no longer even sweating.

Goose bumps covered his entire body.

Even if they were artificial, these were still the "contents" that kept a human body moving. These were the toes, tendons, cartilage, and entrails of her lower body. And Mass Murderer Salome was continually biting into her own "contents" to destroy them.

He felt a floating sensation on the nape of his neck. It no longer felt like his own body.

This was a member of the Kamisato Faction.

It was Kamisato Kakeru's little sister.

Was that why she had this many screws loose?

"But this time, it really is a one-time thing."

Salome sounded like she was planning a surprise birthday party.

Kamijou heard a small hard sound behind him. It was possible the raincoat girl had lightly bit the pocket watch instead of kissing it.

That was a sign of her resolve.

"I'll leave the final blow to you, Kamijou-chan!!"

The mass murderer's right arm mercilessly tore through empty air.

Salome had destroyed, absorbed, and offered up a great variety weapons to thoroughly increase her own destructive power, so a few dozen meters of distance was nothing to her.

An invisible attack shot toward Kihara Yuiitsu who flew through the night sky.

The large wings supporting her like a hang glider were torn apart and she lost her lift. Gravity seemed to grab her with almost unnatural intensity and she began to drop.

If Kamijou ran, he could reach her now.

"..."

Kihara Yuiitsu sent the amorphous Sample Shoggoth below her as a cushion to absorb the shock of landing, but that meant she could not move until that was complete.

Kamijou Touma reached her.

He first sent his right fist toward the Sample Shoggoth at her feet rather than her herself.

The amorphous mass was blown away and Yuiitsu slammed into the ground with her cushion gone.

Still, she did not break.

Kamijou Touma and Kihara Yuiitsu's gazes clashed.

And...

This time, they both sent out attacks.

Kamijou made a scooping uppercut.

Yuiitsu let a torrent of Sample Shoggoth erupt from her right wrist.

Both attacks hit, but that meant neither one was a clean hit. Kamijou's right fist caught Yuiitsu's jaw and Yuiitsu's torrent swept Kamijou away.

"Ghh!!"

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

They both rolled back as if an explosion had occurred between them. Kamijou could not let this continue much longer. Especially when Kihara Yuiitsu seemed to be targeting Mikoto more than him.

But when he tried to place his right hand on the ground and get up, intense pain shot through his shoulder.

It was Sample Shoggoth.

It had changed form to gain fangs which had dug into his shoulder near the collarbone.

"Gah...kh...ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He yelled, but it was no use.

His right hand had grown limp.

Meanwhile, Kihara Yuiitsu was trying to get up. What would she use next? Sample Shoggoth's torrent, St. Germain's magic, or Kamisato's World Rejecter? Any one of them would defeat him now. He could still use his left hand, so he slid it along the ground and felt something hard.

He grabbed it.

Only after picking it up did he realize what it was.

(The UL Exploder!?)

It was the handgun-like device belonging to Kihara Yuiitsu. However, it looked more like an athletics festival starting pistol than a military weapon and it did not actually fire bullets. He did not know how it worked, but it caused an explosion in the empty space it was aimed at.

He held it up with his left hand and placed his finger on the trigger.

He gasped for breath and unsteadily aimed it.

If he fired like crazy, he might just defeat her. Kihara Yuiitsu had a bizarre collection with the St. Germain virus, Sample Shoggoth, and Kamisato's right hand, but she still had a human body below it all, unlike Mass Murderer Salome. While a bullet attacked at a single point, this explosive blast attacked an entire surface and was thus much more difficult to defend against. That might allow him to damage her human body.

This would allow him to stop her.

This would allow him to rescues Misaka Mikoto, who seemed to be Yuiitsu's top priority for some unknown reason, and Kamisato Kakeru, whose hand had already been stolen.

That meant this was not wrong.

He would be right to do this.

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth as he told himself that.

But...

For some reason, he heard the voice of someone who was not even here.

"Give up on that idea. Would you be able to save more people if you trained in martial arts? Would you be able to resolve things more smartly if you had a gun or a knife? That would have the exact opposite effect. *The more means of killing you have and the farther you move from the path that saves your opponent using their own power, the weaker you will become."*

He had been told that when he had been unsure what path to take.

His Understander had told him that.

"Martial arts, a gun, a knife, or any other obvious offensive power would only increase your ability to 'cut people off'."

This may not have been something to remember now.

The ideal and reality were two different things. It may have been fine for him to make that distinction and pull the trigger.

"Your greatest weapon is the powerful arm that reached into the abyss and saved even someone as hopelessly evil and rotten to the core as Magic God Othinus. That ability to connect is your ultimate trump card."

But was that really okay?

After being saved by those words, could he really sully them like this?

"What is wanted from you is not violence on the same level as World Rejecter. It isn't the power to kill. It is the power of human reason that can envelop that violence."

He hesitated.

He thought.

He clenched his teeth.

And that delayed him too much.

"Gah!!!???"

He groaned from intense pain.

Both Kihara Yuiitsu's arms had become amorphous torrents. They swept down from above onto the boy's shoulders. They smashed Mass Murderer Salome's arms as she clung to his back and they mercilessly tried to dislocate his shoulders.

His left hand went limp and the UL Exploder slipped from his grasp.

He had lost his chance.

"This kind of power..."

He knew that, but he still spoke.

Or perhaps this was the ultimate counterpunch against this woman who was justifying her violence with her crazed obsession with revenge.

"...isn't what I wanted."

Death rushed toward him.

The woman in a cheap suit and a tattered lab coat approached him. She grabbed his cheeks between her hands.

He heard an extremely sticky sound in both ears.

“I don’t feel like messing with you anymore, so I’ll use a much more certain method.”

“Ah...gah...!!”

“Now, it’s time for romance. *How would you like to die?* Everyone must have had that truly worthless discussion at some point or another. So how would you like to have your body eaten away? Do you want your fat slowly melted away from the outside by Sample Shoggoth?”

Her lips parted right in front of his face.

Something round sat on top of her seductively wet tongue.

What had originally been a black pill was now a bright red piece of candy.

“Or do you want your brain infected from within by the St. Germain virus? It may have been attenuated, but it can’t be a fun way to go if you don’t have any resistance to it.”

Part 15

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto could not have understood even half of what was going on.

She had not been directly involved in the incidents the St. Germain virus and Sample Shoggoth had come from, so it was hard for her to understand just how frightening they were.

But she could intuitively tell.

She had shaken off the ominous temptation of the Anti-Art Attachment and started to leave the non-functioning cold storage warehouse through the staff entrance, but then she saw it.

She saw Kihara Yuiitsu holding that battered boy’s jaw and attempting to feed him “something” in the form of red candy directly from her mouth.

She was going to “infect” him with her hands or with her mouth.

That would be irreversible.

It was just like damaged cancer cells affecting the healthy cells around them. Once that entered him, it would remake the structure of his body and decisively destroy that boy who had approached her like normal so recently.

“No...”

She had to stop this.

She had to stop it immediately.

But there was nothing she could do. Kamijou Touma had far surpassed the stage she stood on, so even her signature Railgun would be easily deflected. She had learned that all too well against that High Priest guy. But she could not just sit here stricken with a sense of helplessness.

No matter what.

By any means necessary.

Even if it meant violating a taboo.

She needed to utterly, decisively, and immediately end this with a single attack.

Otherwise she would lose that boy forever.

“I can’t let that happeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!”

Frightfully powerful electromagnetic waves spread out from that girl.

The many possessions of the dead inside that cold storage warehouse had supposedly fallen into an eternal slumber, but she summoned them back to the world of the living.

Those weapons had formed an evil plesiosaur, but that silhouette crumbled. They gathered around the girl like a ferocious tornado. They broke apart, lost their great meaning, and transferred away from their original owner as they changed their design to better match the young girl. Countless weapons attached to the armor on her limbs and the joint on her back. A supporting leg situated itself behind her so she would not be crushed by their weight. It was all bizarrely shaped, yet it all fit her perfectly.

There was a giant missile container, an excitation rod for a laser beam, a liquid weapon turret that included sprayers for a flamethrower, liquid nitrogen, and powerful acid, a giant drill meant to break into shelters, a Gatling gun, a rapid-fire cannon, and – as a finishing touch – the weapon from which her signature Railgun took its name.

That weapon was meant to be used as a railway gun.

The large caliber railgun was meant to destroy fortresses.

Part of the system was missing. It was like a jigsaw puzzle completed by filling in some gaps with pure white pieces. The original owner had likely not meant for it to be used like this. It was likely entirely defeating the purpose of the system, much like keeping a battleship's engines inactive and moving it with sails.

But she did not care.

If she could overturn that definite destruction right this instant, she did not care how foolish she looked.

Part 16

In the final instant, Kihara Yuiitsu was just three millimeters away from forcing the red candy on her tongue into Kamijou Touma's mouth.

Without turning her head, she moved just her eyes to glance over.

A moment later, all sound and light vanished.

It did not move at three times the speed of sound. It did not have the small mass of an arcade coin. This blast had been made to create a crater out of a fortress designed to withstand even the most powerful tank.

In all seriousness, a slight mistake in calculation would have swept away an entire section of Academy City's buildings.

If the District 7's Windowless Building had not acted as a cushion, the damage would have spread without end.

Kihara Yuiitsu's body vanished as it was torn away from Kamjiou. The boy could not hold his ground either. He was sent flying into the air and he slammed into the branches of a roadside tree when the shockwave nearly blew him away.

He really did nearly cough up some blood, but he only became aware of that later. For the time being, he could not perceive light or sound.

As his senses returned and his perception of time returned to normal, he finally slipped down from the tree branches.

He crawled along the ground and moved his swollen eyelids to view the world.

“What...happened?”

“I don’t know.”

The response came from Salome who was lying on the ground as well.

But she had lost her torso and arms, so she looked in a much more painful state than him.

“The cold storage warehouse’s wall was blown away. Unless some complete stranger interfered at the last second there...that Misaka Mikoto person must have done something, don’tcha think?”

“...”

Kamijou slowly exhaled.

Was everything over for the time being? He was curious whether Kihara Yuiitsu had survived or not, but he doubted she could continue fighting after taking that tremendous blast. He needed to remain cautious, but he was pretty sure he had managed to survive this day at least.

“Will it really work out that well?”

Salome made an ominous prediction.

“Well, that can wait until after we check on my goddamn stupid brother we left at the school.”

How much did she know about that strange right hand?

These right hands did not choose people at random. They based that selection on something.

Magic God Nephthys had said that once. And during the battle with Fiamma of the Right, Fiamma had been unable to receive that power since he had not been “chosen”. And that was even after severing and stealing Kamijou’s right hand.

If Kihara Yuiitsu was neutralized, then World Rejecter would likely return to Kamisato. Whether the entire arm would regenerate as with Kamijou was unknown, though.

But...

What if it did not return?

That would mean the system that Kihara Yuiitsu had built up was still active. In other words, she still possessed World Rejecter and could still fight. They could assume she would appear as an enemy again.

It was exactly as Salome said.

The first step was checking on Kamisato Kakeru's condition.

But the mass murderer's ominous predictions did not end there.

"Hey, Kamijou-chan."

"What...?"

He slowly got up and picked up Salome who was pretty much only a head at this point. That girl who smelled of death continued.

"You should watch out for Misaka Mikoto."

"...?"

"*Before long, she will take a large step down the wrong path. You could even say she'll break. This no longer has anything to do with whether I mess with her or not.*"

".....”

He thought it was a bad joke.

He thought that crazy girl was reading too much into this and becoming overly suspicious.

But that was a lie.

If he had truly believed that, he would not have felt the need to check.

There was no sign of Misaka Mikoto inside the cold storage warehouse.

He only saw what looked like scrap metal that had apparently been blown to pieces by the massive blast.

EPILOGUE

The Front Front Side of the Coin.

Lock_on_Light_Girl.

Metal crashed heavily to the ground.

The sound spread as Misaka Mikoto wandered through the dark streets.

The Anti-Art Attachment was actually several weapons and they were detaching from her body now that their role was complete.

“Heh heh.”

She had crossed a line.

She had broken the dam that kept her contained within an invisible framework.

She could feel it even if she had nothing to back it up.

“Ha ha...ah ha ha.”

Her heart was pounding.

Her breaths were sweet.

She had not understood all of that massive system. She still had no way of comprehending those blank spots. But she was now certain that understanding that would take her to the next stage she hoped for. She had been wandering blindly through the desert, but now she knew where the closest oasis was. That sort of hope filled her chest.

“The world is so large.”

She spread her arms and looked up into the heavens.

She almost seemed to be reciting the words.

“I can see into the depths of the night sky.”

The blessing of the stars awaited her.

She even started to feel that *she did not belong in this city of science.*

“There are no barriers! The possibilities are endless! There’s so much! There’s so much more for me!! So many clues to follow, so many heights to climb to, and so many summits to aim for!!”

Thus she was happy.

Thus she felt wonderful.

Thus there was nothing to feel sad about.

...But was that really true?

She had already taken the step forward and there was nothing to be done about it now, but that tiny pinprick of a thought knocked at her personality.

She would soon have plenty of material for a rebuttal, but that pinprick did not care.

A single card could cause the entire stack to crumble.

...If that was true, then why did you flee from him by leaving?

She had no answer.

She had no answer.

She had no answer.

“Hey, you over there!”

Then someone called out to her from the side. The deep voice likely belonged to a teacher. She looked over to find a young man in an Anti-Skill uniform. Not only was she a girl wandering alone late at night, but she wore the uniform of Tokiwadai Middle School which was well known for its strict curfew. It was possible she had been involved in some kind of trouble.

But that was not what he asked about.

The male Anti-Skill officer sounded worried when he spoke.

“Are you okay? *You’ve got a pretty bad nosebleed*, so did you run into something? Or is it some kind illness?”

She did not have the slightest clue how to answer that question.

It was like some kind of side effect.

Misaka Mikoto held a trembling hand to her face and tilted her head in confusion at the sensation on her fingertips.

She looked truly, truly puzzled.

♦

Meanwhile, a woman had much more than a nosebleed. Her entire body had been torn apart and she lay in a pool of blood.

It was Kihara Yuiitsu.

But even that was not fatal.

Something crawled all over her body. It was Sample Shoggoth. Just as it had forcibly sewn on Kamisato Kakeru's hand, it sewed together the laceration all over her body.

She had lost quite a bit of blood, but she could get a blood transfusion or, if she could not get one in time, use an IV of boiled saline to at least avoid too large a drop in blood pressure. In her current state, she would be lucky just to avoid going into shock from blood loss.

"Heh...heh."

She leaned against a wind turbine and laughed despite her extreme injuries.

She raised her right hand toward the moon, clenched it, and opened it again.

She could still move it.

Kamisato Kakeru's World Rejecter had not left her.

"I managed to create an outline with Sample Shoggoth and copied their magic using the attenuated St. Germain virus."

A rusty-smelling liquid spilled from the corner of her mouth as she smiled.

She continued to smile.

"But that is not the true value of this right hand. Those who were satisfied after revealing the closer-to-home trick must have been relieved in their conclusion that there was nothing further inside."

That also applied to the one who had likely been watching that battle.

That is, the “human” who had been using his Underline to look down at them from his point of safety.

Board Chairman Aleister.

(It’s true Kamisato Kakeru was my first target as revenge for taking Sensei from me. And it sounded like to fun to take everyone from him, including that Kamijou Touma he found so important.)

With a mental “but”, she switched from thought to speech.

“Aleister. Now that I think about it, you were the original cause. If you hadn’t given Sensei that role, sent him to his death, and had him face that bizarre opponent known as Kamisato Kakeru, none of this tragedy would have occurred.”

She slowly lowered her right hand.

She held it straight forward instead of toward the moon.

There was a windowless building there.

Kihara Yuiitsu thought about the possibilities of World Rejecter’s power in the right hand stolen from Kamisato Kakeru. A dark smile came to her lips. That Board Chairman liked to act all-knowing and all-powerful, but if he really knew everything, then he would have known what would happen to the golden retriever. He had known, yet he had still sent him off as a disposable pawn for some “plan” that Yuiitsu was not sure even existed.

What would Kihara Noukan have said?

Between good and evil it’s evil, and between like and dislike it’s like.

But Yuiitsu was different.

Choosing a different path was *interesting*.

She felt a definite sufficiency there.

“Hey, Aleister.”

She spoke softly, as if singing a lullaby.

Yet her icy voice contained great resolve, as if she planned to set fire to the house once the child fell asleep.

That vengeful demon spoke while drowning in her own unique brand of romance.

“*How many plans have you had to abandon before this one?*”

Slight strength entered her raised right hand.

She prepared to activate its power.

But just before she did, a new footstep sounded from within twenty centimeters of her.

"...!!!???"

Even as injured as she was, it was unnatural for her to miss someone approaching so close. And she did not have time for a detailed examination of the situation. She started moving her hand away from the Windowless Building and toward the noise.

But before she could, someone grabbed her wrist.

Their other hand grabbed her throat and lifted her up.

She was forced to her feet and her back was slammed against the wind turbine.

"Kah...ah...!"

She gasped as a face appeared just five centimeters from her own.

It was Board Chairman Aleister.

That "human" looked like both a man and a woman, like both an adult and a child, and like both a saint and a sinner. His emotionless eyes peered deep into the out-of-control factor that was Kihara Yuiitsu.

And then he spoke.

"If you wish to kill me, then feel free to try. As long as you achieve your objective, you may take whatever detour you wish. If that is your desire, I will take you on at any time."

This vengeance-seeker respected that golden retriever from the bottom of her heart.

But behind that she hid intense emotion that made that identity appear shallow.

"*But complete your job first. Anything else would be far too cruel to 'that man' who lost his life to push you to action.*"

His words did not even try to hide the fact that he was behind it all.

"Heh."

Kihara Yuiitsu laughed.

Her laughter was out of control even as she had a hand around her throat.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Hee hee!! Gya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

"*What do you think you're looking at, you bitch? Do you want me to curse you to death right this instant?*"

♦

"Hm."

Laura Stuart spoke to herself on the other side of the globe.

"That confirms it."

♦

Kamisato Kakeru's mind was hazy.

He felt more heat in his right hand than pain. He also felt an odd pressure. He turned his blurry vision in that direction and found it was forcibly tied off with a cloth or ribbon. He seemed to be lying on the examination table in a moonlit infirmary. Blood was smeared here and there and the room felt far from peaceful.

"Ha...ha..."

He had hated World Rejecter so much and now it was gone.

The entire hand had been severed and some woman named Kihara Yuiitsu had taken it.

"Uuh!!"

He felt like the depths of his mind were being stirred up by the despair that overcame him.

He had not wanted that power.

He was relieved that it was gone.

But...

The girls of the Kamisato Faction had gathered around him for their convenience, but what if that really had been due to the influence of his right hand? Now that the hand had transferred to someone else, the girls might leave him as well.

That in and of itself was good.

His original objective had been to destroy the strange category known as the Kamisato Faction so that those girls would return to being strangers with free wills of their own.

However...

The problem was the possibility of their next owner using them as she saw fit.

What if Ellen, Elza, and the other girls gained the same blind trust in Kihara Yuiitsu that had led them to gather around him? What if those with extraordinary power like Claire and Salome retained their willingness to do anything for “the owner of that right hand”?

They had said themselves that they were willing to dump a few bodies in the mountains for him.

It had sounded like a joke, but he did not believe it was only a joke. If someone with no self-control had that right hand, then it was all over. Who could say how many crimes those girls would commit before returning to their senses?

(I have to...)

He clenched his teeth while too weak from blood loss to even get up.

(I have to...do something...)

But what could he do now that he had lost World Rejecter? He was the kind of normal high school boy that one could find anywhere. He knew that all too well. He was not a genius with an IQ of 200 and he was not a martial artist who could kill a bear bare-handed. He did not stand a chance against Claire or Salome, not to mention Kihara Yuiitsu who had adopted so many bizarre powers.

He felt dark, dark despair.

And as if to kick him while he was down, he heard a small noise.

Yes.

It was a footstep.

“Hee!?”

Just as he gathered his strength, he rolled right off the examination table. But he did not have time to cry out at the pain in his back and hip.

He saw a familiar face in the infirmary.

No, he saw several familiar faces.

With the moonlight reflected in their eyes, the girls gradually gathered closer around him now that he was awake.

Just the day before, this gathering would have meant nothing.

But at the moment, Kamisato lacked his right hand.

Kihara Yuiitsu had already stolen it. She had control of the right hand that had constructed that ridiculous harem, so the odds were good they were here to do something for her.

In other words, to eliminate an enemy.

They would kill Kamisato Kakeru with a smile on their faces, dirty their hands, and run to Yuiitsu, hoping for her praise.

“Pant, pant!!”

Unable to get up properly, he tried to slide back in a sitting position. It was difficult without his hand, but this was not the time to worry about that. He could only press the stump against the floor and try to move as far away as he could.

This was of course a futile attempt.

The circle tightened in.

He was trapped.

Finally, someone who seemed to have completely changed form spoke up in the moonlight.

“*Are you okay, boss!? I'm so glad you finally woke up!!*”

It was Elza.

Her brown hair was cut with tufts that looked like fox ears. The plastic bottle in her hand was filled with old ten yen coins. She was a blunt delinquent girl, but she actually excelled at housework and yet did not want anyone to know. She stood there as she always had.

“Eh? Ah?”

She did not seem to be under Kihara Yuiitsu’s control.

In fact...

“I was terrified since Claire had gotten herself knocked out of the fight earlier. But I tied off the wound and gave you a ton of saline, so you should be on the way back to a stable condition now that you’ve woken up.”

“Ellen...???”

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

But why?

Before he could ask that question, the long-haired girl in a baggy lab coat said something more.

"*What's so strange about us doing everything we can for you, Kamisato-han?*"

"..."

"C'mon, why are you acting so distant after everything we've been through? Haven't we told you we'll do anything for you, boss?"

"....."

He was speechless.

"H-hey. What is it, boss? Why are you covering your face like that? Does your wound still hurt? Dammit, if only they'd had some specialized anesthetic here. All we can do is cool the injured area to numb the pain."

"He's probably more shocked about the loss his dominant hand. You've always been awful at taking care of people's hearts, Elza."

The usual circle of girls was there.

They had all accepted Kamisato Kakeru himself, not World Rejecter.

He had a place here.

A boy with another right hand had once said people were not defined by their right hands. He had said the people were the ones that summoned the power of their right hand. He had said Kamisato had so many people around him because all of those people adored him.

Kamisato had not been able to believe it.

That normal high school boy had lacked what he needed to believe it.

But...

But...

But...

(Yes...)

That puny boy covered his face with one hand and one wrist to desperately force down the sobs as he built his resolve anew.

(Yes, yes!! I'd made up my mind from the beginning, hadn't I? No matter what happens to them and no matter what influence they fall under, I will never abandon them. I will return to them to their original lives!!)

World Rejecter.

That power had been given to him because he sought a nonexistent ideal.

But the answer had been right in front of his eyes the entire time. He had never needed to do anything at all. If they had all just returned to their original location, it would all have been settled.

Yes, for every last one of them.

Including Kamisato Kakeru.

"Ellen, Elza."

"What is it?"

"Do you want something, boss?"

He smiled a little when they responded like they were looking after a child with a cold.

(Do I want something, hm?)

He focused on that again and spoke.

"How long will it take for Claire to recover?"

"She should be working at reconnecting her upper body to her lower body right about now."

"But if you say you need something, boss, I'm sure she'll come running. If she wants to, she can move around as just her upper body. In fact, I bet she could hop around as just a head in an emergency."

Kamisato sighed.

His thoughts turned to his lost hand.

"The hand Kihara Yuiitsu cut away from herself should still be in the schoolyard. Go get that. I'll use it as a replacement hand for the time being. If Claire connects it, I should be able to move it properly."

There was of course the issue of compatibility just like with organ transplants, but since Kihara Yuiitsu had already stolen his hand and attached it to herself, he doubted there would be any issues there. And even if there was, he could just have one of the girls find a breakthrough using some dirty technique of theirs.

(I doubt World Rejecter will come back if I just sit around.)

Imagine Breaker prioritized Kamijou Touma as its owner even if his arm was stolen, but either World Rejecter lacked that ability or Kihara Yuiitsu was keeping it from working right with some kind of trick.

That meant he would never get it back if he did not take action.

He would have to chop off the right hand she had stolen and take it back.

"..."

He would now seek the very right hand he had hated so much.

He was aware of the irony, but he still thought quietly to himself.

(It doesn't matter if I have conflicting desires. I don't care if I end up blowing myself away the instant I get the power back. Kihara Yuiitsu. I can't let her abuse my right hand. I need to take it back before that happens. If I'm going to bring back those normal days, I need to end the tragedy here!!)

Kamisato Kakeru slowly breathed out and then stood on his own two feet.

"Come with me, everyone. Let's bring this all to an end."

♦

And finally, one superfluous conclusion.

It is a truly small and insignificant conclusion.

"Morning, Kami-yan. Heading to a new school really changes when you have to leave in the morning, doesn't it? I keep leaving early cause I'm afraid I'll be late, but then I get here way too early."

"Not that it really matters, but what happened to that pointlessly strained atmosphere?"

"Well, once we calmed down and thought about it, we couldn't figure out why we were so obsessed with burning porn magazines, dolls, and body pillows at school last night."

"So you idiots saw the light, huh?"

“Also…”

“Yeah?”

“We should’ve realized sooner that you’d never be working that hard to stop us if it wasn’t for our own good.”

That everyday sort of recovery was small.

But it was not something to be looked down on.

AFTERWORD

If you've been reading the volumes one at a time, welcome back. If you had the courage to buy them all at once, welcome.

This is Kazuma Kamachi.

New Testament is already at Volume 15! As I mentioned in Volume 14's afterword, I think this was another volume of Kamisato Kakeru and those around him destroying the "sanctuaries" that had settled into place in this series. I think I placed most of the main characters in a position where they couldn't maintain the usual look on their face. The only exceptions are the girls of the Kamisato Faction who (should have) looked most suspect at first glance.

The Kamisato Faction first appeared in Volume 14, so they are quite shallow and I expect a lot of readers thought they were mostly just a symbol. But what they're doing isn't that much different what the people on Kamijou's side do. My experiment for Volumes 14 and 15 was to see how different a character looks if you've seen them gradually built up as a protagonist or if you haven't.

So now that you've seen Kamisato Kakeru's character over the course of two volumes, your impression of his environment may have changed. But as the writer, I didn't do anything special. The main point is that he "looks" different just by having his character built up like that. ...In other words, this is something that can influence people's impression of a series as a whole, yet it's something the writer can't do intentionally. By building things up, the characters become more appealing and you can dig deeper into the world building. All of that is great, but it also works against you when you've built up certain expectations and have "sanctuaries" you can't move even if you want to. They all start piling up like a falling block puzzle game. This has strengthened my desire to work toward opening up some breathing room in that sense.

This story was set in Academy City and involved a variety of technology, but the overall theme was more related to magic. To be more specific, I took my material from the concept of "sacrifice". It was touched on in the novel, but people often have a grim view of sacrifices since the idea of living sacrifices has become so prominent. But since we have to specify "living" sacrifices, there are of course non-living sacrifices. I focused more on those.

The most obvious one was Salome, the naked raincoat girl(!?), but I also added in some other characters, gimmicks, and situations that included the symbolism of sacrifice.

Combine that with my focus on destroying “sanctuaries”, and this volume may have had an overall ominous atmosphere or unstable image.

For the Kamisato Faction, I tried to use a naming system I hadn’t used in the series before, but...hm. I think I may have gone a little overboard there. Yet when I look in baby name dictionaries, I find them recommending even crazier names as if it’s normal. Is this what they call the flow of time? I try to give my protagonists relatively easy to read names since their names appear the most often, but I’ve started worrying over what qualifies as “easy to read” with some of these modern names I’m seeing.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and to my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. This threw in a ton of characters instead of focusing on a single point, so it must have been hard to adjust for that. Thank you very much for sticking with me.

Also, Kasai Shin-san designed the A.A.A. Mikoto Version. He has helped here and there with mecha-related stuff. I get the feeling that none of the illustrators that work with me are your average person, and he is no exception. Anyway, thank you very much!

I also give my thanks to the readers. This story involved drawing on a bunch of past characters and parts of the setting, so it might have been harder to read through than normal. I was trying to create something enjoyable by having everything build up in a positive direction even as the sanctuaries were destroyed. I leave it to you to judge how I did. Thank you yet again.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Is it just me or did Salome actually have the strongest mind?

-Kamachi Kazuma